CHAPTER V

Swami Vivekananda's views about Buddha and Buddhism -
and their impact on him

It is rightly said that the history of the world is the history of its greatest men. This is especially true of India whose long history is filled with the life and work of some of the greatest men the world has ever produced. But the greatness of these greatest men lies in conquering the hearts of millions of people through non-violence and love. Mention here may be made of Lord Buddha who enriched Indian culture and made Indian thought overflow its narrow geographical bounds. "With Buddha begins the story of that greater India which fills the whole of the Asian continent with the sweetness and aroma of her spiritual contribution." Swami Vivekananda is one of the most prominent leaders of our country in recent times who has called our attention to the great work of Buddha.

in the past and the greater work that the Buddha spirit can do to us today. In his lectures and discourses he has beautifully expressed his conviction that modern India requires to assimilate the intellect of Śaṅkara and the heart of Buddha, the great heart for which somehow or other, in the later development of philosophy in this country, we had practically found no place. That the human mind can not only think high, but also feel deeply and work energetically from that high point of view was something which was continually forgotten for centuries together, and it was Swamiji who pointed out to us that the origin of almost all the social remedies in our time, all those things which made us immobile as a people, leading to the accumulation of all sorts of evils in our body politic, all these experiences of recent centuries can be traced back to the banishment of the Buddha spirit, of the Buddha heart, from the thought and practice of our country. In the same breath he exhorted us to turn back once again to that great heritage to call back Buddha, to our nation and to our hearts; and he also added that until we did that, our country could never hope to develop that internal strength which we all wish and pray for. This was the approach of all enlightened minds of India in recent decades. This positive approach to Buddha and his place in our history has gripped the minds of our people, so that today, after nearly sixty years of education by Swami
Vivekananda and other leaders the nation feels a sense of pride in owning Buddha as one of its glorious teachers and in being the children of a country which produced a Buddha. This is the context in which we are living and functioning today.\(^2\)

"Buddhism is historically the most important religion - historically and not philosophically - because it was the most tremendous religious movement that the world ever saw, the most gigantic spiritual wave ever to burst upon human society. There is no civilisation on which its effect has not been felt in some way or other."\(^3\)

Notwithstanding all these high praise and appreciative remarks showered over Lord Buddha and his message, Swamiji had some mental pull-back about the absolute truth inherent in Buddhistic thoughts and ideas. He had pretty reservation to accept Buddhism in its entirety, steeped as he was with the other gigantic philosophy of Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. Buddha has appealed to the entire human race to accept the lives of mendicants with a view to getting rid of suffering inherent

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2 Swami Ranganathananda: Eternal Values for a Changing Society, p.156.
in human birth and existence. To Swamiji it appears to be a feeble attempt at solving human problems. It is not really grappling with the problem of life. It is rather running away from it. Life should be ever growing and flourishing. Scientific knowledge and industrial development should be embraced as an inevitable fruit of human brain and endeavour. Population shall be ever growing and growing needs of basic human needs should be their along with it. How can the world leave aside all these questions? Shall we go back to primitive way of life? Shall the entire human society commit suicide? or turn to beggary? Who will be the giver and who will be the beggar? How shall the food grow? How shall we cover ourselves with mendicant’s raiments? These are pertinent and overwhelming questions. Buddhism does not offer any answer to these questions. Denial of life, and its enjoyment, repudiating the luxury of life, even the basic importance of life is a very short-cut process. It is neither a panacea nor even a palliative for the manifold malaise of social life. Tagore also decried this aspect of Buddhism. Though service over self, work for the good of mankind, charity and benevolence, all these are noble creeds, nobly laid down by Buddha which ever remain the basic principles of civilisation from the dawn of history to this day, Buddha merely underscored these points and revived the memory of mankind to these aspects of moral and spiritual role of mankind.
Moreover, on the sphere of metaphysical speculation also, Vivekananda could not look eye to eye with Lord Buddha's thoughts and philosophies. In the philosophical thought that has emerged from Buddha's ethical teaching there is no recognition of a 'personal Self'. "His doctrine was this: Why is there misery in our life? Because we are selfish. We desire things for ourselves - that is why, there is misery. What is the way out? The giving up of the self. The self does not exist; the phenomenal world, all this that we perceive, is all that exists. There is nothing called soul underlying the cycle of birth and death. There is the stream of thought, one thought following another in succession, each thought coming into existence and becoming non-existent at the same moment, that is all; there is no thinker of the thought, no soul. The body is changing all the time; so is mind, consciousness. The self therefore is a delusion. All selfishness comes of holding on to the self, to this illusory self. If we know the truth that there is no self, then we will be happy and make others happy..........

How to kill the self? Become perfectly unselfish, ready to give up your life even for an ant. Work not for any superstition, not to please any God, not to get any reward, but because you are seeking your own release by killing yourself. Worship and prayer and all that, these are all non-sense. You all say, "I thank God" - but where does He live? You donot know and
yet you are all doing crazy about God"⁴. In Buddha's advocacy of religion there is no place of God. "He was often asked if there was a God and he answered, he did not know. When asked about right conduct, he would reply, "Do good and be good". There came five Brahmans, who asked him to settle their discussion. One said, "Sir, my book says that this is the way to come to God". Another said, "That is wrong", for my book says such and such and this is the way to come to God", and so the others. He listened calmly to all of them, and there asked them one by one, "Does any one of your books say that God becomes angry that He ever injures anyone, that He is impure?" "No Sir, they all say that God is pure and good". "Then, my friends, why do you not become pure and good first, that you may know What God is?"⁵ God and soul are the two big superstitions. God is only a superstition invented by the priests. If there is a God, as these Brahmans preach, why is there so much misery in the world? He is just like me, a slave to the law of causation. If he is not bound by the law of causation, then why does he create? Such a God is not at all satisfactory .........Cur whole life is continuous suffering; and this is not sufficient punishment - after death we must go to places where we have

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other punishments. Yet we continually perform all kinds of rites and ceremonials to please this creator of the world!"
These ceremonials are all wrong. There is but one ideal in the world. Destroy all delusions, what is true will remain. As soon as the clouds are gone, the Sun will shine.

Quoting from different utterances of Buddha, Swamiji is out to show that there is no place of soul and God in the thoughts and philosophies of Lord Buddha. But inspite of Buddha's idea contrary to traditional religion, says Swami Vivekanananda, the religion of Buddha spread fast. It was because of the marvellous love which for the time in the history of humanity, overflowed a large heart and devoted itself to the service not only of all men but of all living things - a love which did not care for anything except to find a way of release from suffering for all beings. Man was loving God and had forgotten all about his brotherman. The man who in the name of God can give up his very life, can also turn around and kill his brotherman in the name of God. This was the state of the world. They would sacrifice the son for the glory of God, would rob nations for the glory of God, would kill thousands of beings for the glory of God, would drench the earth with blood for the glory of God. Buddha turned to the other God - man. "It is man that is to be loved. It was the first wave of intense love for all men - the first wave of true unadulterated wisdom - that,
starting from India gradually inundated country after country, north, south, east and west"7.

Swamiji opines that "the negative elements of Buddhism - there is no God and no soul - died out. I can say that God is the only being that exists; it is a very positive statement. He is the one reality. When Buddha says there is no soul, I say, "Man, thou art one with the universe; thou art all things. ............The reformative element (of Buddha) died out"8.

Swami Vivekananda emphatically declares that "Buddha's great doctrine of selflessness can be better understood if it is looked at in our way. In the Upanisads there is already the great doctrine of the Atman and the Brahman. The Atman, Self, is the same as Brahman, the Lord. This Self is all that is; It is the only reality. Maya, delusion, makes us see it as different. There is one Self not many. That one Self shines in various forms. Man is man's brother in various forms. Man is man's brother because all men are one. A man is not only my brother, say the Vedas, he is himself. Hurting any part of the universe, I only hurt myself. I am the universe. It is a delusion that I think I am Mr. so-and-so - that is the delusion.

8 The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 8, p.103. (Fifth Edition)
"The more you approach your real Self, the more this delusion vanishes. The more all differences and divisions disappear, the more you realise all as the one Divinity. God exists; but He is not the man sitting upon the cloud. He is pure Spirit. Where does He reside? Nearer to you than your very self. He is the soul. How can you perceive God as separate and different from yourself? When you think of Him as some one separate from yourself, you do not know Him. He is yourself.

It is selfishness that you think that you see Mr. so-and-so and that all the world is different from you. You believe you are different from me. You do not take any thought of me. You go home and have your dinner and sleep. If I die, you still eat, drink and are merry. But you cannot really be happy when the rest of the world is suffering. We are all one. It is the delusion of separateness that is the root of misery. Nothing exists, but the Self; there is nothing else."9

Thus as against Lord Buddha Swamiji justified with cogent argument Brahman and Ātman, the very difference of which he abolished in his Jñāna-Kanda which is in a sense the exposition of the Advaitā Vedānta of Śaṅkara in a very clear and lucid language.

But as a great admirer of Lord Buddha, Swamiji goes

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on to say, "The life of Buddha shows that even a man who does not believe in God, has no metaphysics, belongs to no sect, and does not go to any Church or Temple, and is a confessed materialist, even he can attain to the highest. Buddha may or may not believe in God; that does not matter to me. He reached the same state of perfection to which others come by Bhakti—love of God—Yoga or Jñāna. Perfection does not come from belief or faith. Talk does not count for anything. Parrots can do that. Perfection comes through the disinterested performance of action".

In spite of his disagreement with Buddha in very many ways Swamiji could not but show regard for Buddha's deep universal love for all living beings. Swamiji's highest tribute to Buddha has been expressed in the following words, "The greatest soul-power that has ever manifested", "the greatest soul that ever wore a human form", "the greatest, the boldest preacher of morality that the world ever saw", "the greatest preacher of equality", "the greatest Hindu ever born". These are only a handful of expressions that Swamiji has used in describing Buddha.

But though he has paid highest tribute to Buddha, Swamiji is not ready to endorse all his philosophy. To quote

his words, "I donot endorse all his philosophy. I want a good deal of metaphysics, for myself. I entirely differ in many respects, but because I differ, is that any reason why I should not see the beauty of the man? He was the only man who was bereft of all motive power. There were other great men who all said they were the Incarnations of God Himself, and that those who would believe in them would go to heaven. But what did Buddha say with his dying breath? "None can help you; help yourself; work out your own salvation". He said about, himself, "Buddha is the name of infinite knowledge, infinite as the sky, I Goutama, have reached that state; you will all reach that too if you struggle for it". Bereft of all motive power he did not want to go to heaven, did not want money; he gave up his throne and everything else and went about begging his bread through the streets of India, preaching for the good of men and animals with a heart as wide as the ocean.

He was the only man who was ever ready to give up his life for animals to stop a sacrifice. He once said to a king, "If the sacrifice of a lamb helps you to go to heaven, sacrificing a man will help your better; so sacrifice me. "The king was astonished. And yet this man was without any motive power. He stands as the perfection of the active type, and the very height to which he attained, shows that through the
power of work we can also attain to the highest spirituality" 11. He did not merely talk; he was ready to give up his own life for the world. He said, "This animal sacrifice is another superstition like that of God and soul" 12.

Paying his highest tribute to Buddha Vivekananda said, "I would like to see moral men like Gautama Buddha, who did not believe in a personal God or a personal soul, never asked about them, but was a perfect agnostic, and yet was ready to lay down his life for any one, and worked all his life for the good of all............He did not go to the forest to meditate for his own salvation; he felt that the world was burning, and that he must find a way out. Why is there so much misery in the world?" - was the one question that dominated his whole life 13.

Buddha's concept of equality of man and equal right of man to the knowledge and wisdom (even to the knowledge of Veda) found an echoing heart and reflection in the Marxian concept of equality or Samya-vada. But so far as the concept of economic equality underlying Marxism was concerned it was beyond Buddha's sphere of thought. Buddha had other concept regarding material needs which is quite unlike Marxian concept. In Swamiji's words,

"He (Buddha) preached the most tremendous truths. He taught the very gist of the philosophy of the Vedas to one and all without distinction, he taught it to the world at large, because one of his great massages was the equality of man. Men are all equal. No concession thereto anybody! Buddha was the great preacher of equality. Every man and woman has the same right to attain spirituality - that was his teaching. The difference between the priests and the other castes he abolished, Even the lowest were entitled to the highest attainments; he opened the door of Nirvāṇa to one and all."

In concluding his great work on Karma-Yoga, Swami Vivekananda gives the following tribute to the character and personality of Lord Buddha:

"Let me tell you in conclusion a few words about one man who actually carried this teaching into practice. That man is Buddha. He is the one man who ever carried this into perfect practice. All the prophets of the world, except Buddha, had external motives to move them to unselfish action. The prophets of the world, with this single exception, may be divided into two sets, one set holding that they are incarnations of God come down on earth, and the other holding that they are only messengers from God; and both draw their impetus for work

from outside, except reward from outside, however highly spiritual may be the language they use. But Buddha is the only prophet who said, "I donot care to know your various theories about God. What is the use of discussing all the subtle doctrines about the soul. Do good and be good. And this will take you to freedom and to whatever truth there is". He was, in the conduct of his life, absolutely without personal motives; and what man worked more than he? Show me in history one character who has soared so high above all. The whole human race has produced but one such character, such high philosophy, such wide sympathy. He is the ideal Karma-Yogi, acting entirely without motive and the history of humanity shows him to have been the greatest man ever born; He was the first who dared to say, "Believe not because some old manuscripts are produced, believe not because it is your national belief, because you have been made to believe it from childhood; but reason it all out, and, after you have analysed it, then if you find that it will do good to one and all, believe it, live up to it, and help others to live up to it". He works best who works without any motive, neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else; and when a man can do that, he will be a Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world. This man represents the very highest ideal Karma-Yogi. In another context Swamiji said, "The

life of Buddha has an especial appeal. All my life I have been very fond of Buddha, but not of his doctrine. I have more veneration for that character than for any other - that boldness, that fearlessness, and that tremendous love! He was born for the good of men. Others may seek God, others may seek truth for themselves; he did not even care to know truth for himself. He sought truth because people were in misery. How to help them, that was his only concern. Throughout his life he never had a thought for himself. How can we ignorant, selfish, narrow-minded human beings ever understand the greatness of this man?" 16

Buddha, the great Karma-Yogin was the greatest inspiration for Vivekananda. He is the great source of infinite compassion for mankind who stood for annihilation of self for the good of man and acted solely without any motivation.

in fact, signifies merging of individual self into the universal self taking it in the sense of a collective consciousness of humanity, unfathered from any conception of Soul or Brahman of Upaniṣads. There is no string behind this concept of Buddha. This concept of collective consciousness of man is not linked with any personal or impersonal Soul (Brahman or God). It is self-sufficient, all-comprehensive and all-pervasive. Whereas Vivekananda could accept the basic thought of this concept, he could not be satisfied with this self-explanatory process of Buddha. His mind was too prone to the metaphysical aspects of life. It is not simply a question of giving a scientific causal relation to Buddhistic thought. It has also its root in the spiritual realisation of the cause (God) propounded by his Guru Sri Ramakrishna who taught him to see the world as the manifestation of God, that turmoil'd his soul. Thus Vivekananda acts and reacts on the concept of Buddhism. There is a sort of touch-and-go in the whole process.

"Aho Vijhya Kaha Āga Ār" (This is only external phenomenon or illusion - go ahead and tell me the basic truth - noumenon - the eternal truth). In other words, Vivekananda had no reservation over the concept of Karma-Vada laid down by Buddha but it must follow from the concept of eternal Soul. It is not just his (Vivekananda's) whim. It furnishes the proper prospect and background to make the idea comprehensive and
winning. Studying from the historical point of view, Buddha might have performed a supendous work in laying aside the controversial points of the concept of God or Brahman. He did not like to tread upon this thorny-path. He laid before man a scheme of life based upon love, charity and reality and on the principle of "Be good and do good". He insisted on the attainment of purity of the individual life - a self-less, motiveless life. But looking back from a distance of 2500 years, this concept of Buddhism cut off from all spiritual and metaphysical perspective appears to be like a crystal ball dewy and glistening tearful and shining against the blue sky but sustaining a precarious existence. Swamiji wanted to save beautiful crystal and stirry beauty of Buddhism within the protective and decorative framework of Advaita Vedānta and in that he succeeded immensely. Vivekananda saw the danger inherent in the bare concept of Karma-Yoga. Though it could hold its own for some days, it could not stand on its own permanently. It found itself standing on a slippery ground. The entire world was loosening from under its feet and a gaping fissure was visible underneath the entire concept. The outcome of this theory shorn of any spiritual decor or spiritual background in the long run drove man not initiated in and illumined by the Master's high wisdom into despair and despiration, and it proved to be devastating for the society. It drove men
to the arms of atheism. They started having recourse to all sorts of unprincipled and immoral practices.

Commenting on the decay of Buddhism in India Swami Vivekananda said, that inspite of the preaching of mercy to animals, inspite of the sublime ethical religion, inspite of the hair-splitting discussions about the existence or non-existence of a permanent soul, the whole building of Buddhism tumbled down piecemeal; and the ruin was simply hideous .......

The most hideous ceremonies, the most horrible, the most obscure books that human hands ever wrote or the human brain ever conceived, the most bestial forms that ever passed under the name of religion, have all been creation of degraded Buddhism. And referring to the legacy which Buddhism in its state of degradation left for Śaṅkara, Swami Vivekananda continued:

But India had to live and the spirit of the Lord descended again............. the marvellous boy Śaṅkarachārya arose. The writings of this boy of sixteen are the wonders of the modern world, and so was the boy. He wanted to bring back the Indian world to its pristine purity but think of the amount of the task before him. All these horrors that you are trying to reform are the outcome of that reign of degradation. The Tartars and the Baluchis and all the hideous races of mankind
came to India and became Buddhists, and assimilated with us and brought their national customs, and the whole of our national life became a huge page of the most horrible and the most beastile customs. That was the inheritance which the boy got from the Buddhists, and from that time to this, the whole work in India is a re-conquest of this Buddhistic degradation by the Vedānta. It is still going on, it is not yet finished. Śaṅkara came, a great philosopher, and showed that the real essence of Buddhism and that of the Vedānta are not very different, but that the disciples did not understand the Master, and have degraded themselves, denied the existence of the soul and of God and have become atheists. That was what Śaṅkara showed, and all the Buddhists began to come back to the old religion.

Undoubtedly Vivekananda found in Buddha the greatest man ever born who dedicated motiveless service to mankind. "Do good and be good" is the Summum Bonum of life. There can be no other good motive for living. This supreme motive of life inspired Vivekananda who stood for reorientation of humanity. He rejected all the accumulated excrescences of Buddhism after the decadent started. Buddhists lost all their moral anchorage of life. They denied soul and they could not stick to the great ethical principle of their Master. On the other hand, they got themselves, involved in all sorts of
obscurantism, magic art and some sort of necromancy which was the off-shoot of ancient tantric rites. The entire society was turned into the vortex of degradation. In fact, hellish chaos was let loose. Nothing divine, nothing sublime could survive in this vicious world.

Śaṅkara could see the danger inherent in this disorder of society. He wanted to turn back the mind of man to the spiritual principle of Vedānta. Soul was reinstated in its pristine glory and divinity was restored to its own rightful position in the scheme of life. Society started to breathe freely, asphyxiating fume that was poisoning the entire spirit of life was blown off by the doctrine of Vedānta. Men felt new glory in their existence. They felt that the Divine is in them and they have a divine role to play. This role is conducive equally to their individual souls as much as it was furthering the cause of the eternal soul. The entire society is to be resuscitated with the inspiring voice of Upaniṣads or Vedānta. Herein lies the historical role of Vivekananda. Thus Vivekananda found both of these great pillars of mankind - Buddha and Śaṅkara, the foundation of future edifice of human society while he himself like a colossus stood astride the two worlds - world of Buddha and the world of Śaṅkara.

In Vivekananda the ethics of selfless, service
epitomised in the word, 'Be good and do good' of Buddha acted as a soul-stirring idea which electrified and thrilled the entire being of Swamiji. He felt within him saturated as was drawn with identical motive from the other source. What his great Guru Sri Ramakrishna taught him through his very commonplace anecdotes and stray remarks found enough concurrence in the preaching of Buddha. So it was not difficult for him to accept the "greatest man of the world", namely Buddha.

Yet without the concept of soul, Swamiji's thrilling heart will not be quenched. His Guru Ramakrishna taught him to see the world as a manifestation of Goddess Kali. The vision was shown to him; how can he deny that? Who will give him the necessary scientific support for his vision? Vivekananda, the great rationalist as much as a great spiritualist, shall not be satisfied by mere vision. Who knows that these are not false visions? Who knows that he was not hypnotised? Who knows that he has not been dominated by a magician in the form of Ramakrishna? So his great curious and questioning soul went out in quest of truth and to find corroborative evidence and support for such vision in the holy books of ancient India - Veda and the Upanishads. He was delighted to find enough justification for such vision in Sankara's Advaita Vedānta. Thus his soul found contentment in his Guru's message. Thus one half of the soul of Vivekananda, the great Karma-Yogin and Sannyasin found
quietude and mooting in Advaita Vedānta and the other half of his soul which was dedicated to and vowed for the good of the people found in Buddhism, a great sustaining spirit in the motto 'be good and do good'. Thus the world found a new colossus whose one leg was planted in Advaita Vedānta and the other leg was firmly rooted in Karma-Veda of Buddha.

India of today with all its glories and with all its imperfections on her head is the creation of that great colossus Swami Vivekananda. It is Vivekananda who started the new India on the basis of its ancient heritage. The soul of that movement was of course Sri Ramakrishna. What Raja Rammohan Roy did was imposition of European culture and basic creed of Christianity larded with Upanisadic aroma on Indian mind and tried to transplant it on the Indian soil. It is Ramakrishna-Vivekananda who reversed the process. Vivekananda started from India and spread out to the world the spiritualism of ancient Indian thought. Like the great Indian banyan tree it spread its branches all over the world. The soil was all fertile because it was indigenous. So it grew to full foliage and branched off to provide verduous shade and afford resting bower to all suffering humanity perched by dry and hot atmosphere of industrial civilisation. Thus while Rammohan Roy's Brahmasamaj got a premature burial, Vivekananda's message spread like bonfire throughout the world. His Chicago speech was like a quake-shock that made fissure in the mind of alien people.
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