

# RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY IN ANCIENT INDIA.

BY HARDIN T. MCCLELLAND.

## I. VEDIC SPECULATION.

THE great difficulty attached to our customary search for an orderly chronological development of a nation's life and thought is, particularly in the case of ancient India, that the records which come down to us are so seldom in perfect series that we are at a loss to really understand what were causes and what were effects of any certain element in that series. The internal evidence of ancient Indian records is so vaguely given out or the method of their composition is so abstracted from related external events, that the thread of historical continuity is altogether too tenuous, too fragile to permit our weaving from it a very strong fabric of knowledge; nor, as is sometimes sadly the case with other ancient climes, can we tailor enough cloth to keep out the chill of our utter ignorance of past civilizations, religions and philosophies.

When dealing with the cultural heritage of Modern India, even when represented by the polished eclecticism of such leading lights as Tagore or the two Swamis Dayanand and Vivekananda, we cannot help noticing that this historical difficulty stands to the forefront to a greater degree possibly than with any other of the world's major nations. And as the early religious writers of ancient India, thru a limitation either of intellectual or practical interest, show an almost total lack of the historical sense, so does our attempt to find temporal sequence in all things valued culturally by them suffer in proportion to our own lack of definite historical data. It is therefore reasonable when proposing an interpretation of such a land of mystic calm and joyous exaltation, to take our pattern of treatment from the Hindus themselves. That is, to estimate their aspirations toward Reality and Wisdom, not as a chronological exfoliation but as a slowly developed psychological introspection into the exact nature of the human soul, its divine derivation, its hazardous evolu-

tion into maturity, its even more hazardous exercise of moral choice and purpose, and the necessity of its final redemption from the Karmic wheel of the finite world. If they were content to build their religious ideals on the ability of the individual to raise himself again to God, even tho temporarily torn away from Him by having been born into the material world, we should be content to build our interpretation of those ideals on the same or correlative grounds.

First, it is well to distinguish between those aspirational systems which are religious thru being expressions of faith in prayer, ceremony and codes of piety, and those which are philosophical thru being consistent endeavors toward a direct and reasonably intelligible understanding of Divine Law, Truth, Righteousness and all those sacred qualities ascribed to, derived from, or at least heuristic of the Supreme Self of the Universe. Under this distinction the religious and philosophical systems of ancient India may be ranged according to their general outline and characteristic attitude. Thus, as showing more elements of religion than of philosophy in what they aspired to experience and believe in, we may enumerate those expressions of reverence and devotion usually grouped with the literatures of exhortation and supplication variously indexed under such terms as the Vedas, the Upanishads, Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Krishnaism. While those systems showing efforts more philosophical than religious in their expressions of metaphysical analyses and synthetic instruction would be arranged so as to include the Purva Mimamsa, Vedanta, Samkhya, Nyaya Vaiseshika, Yoga, the Jains and Lokayätikans. In this order we seem to be following the course of popular development, perhaps not the chronological order but rather what seems to have been the order in which the different schools of faith and wisdom commanded the highest relish and widest pursuit in the minds and conduct of their respective devotees.

The first expressions of religious faith and aspiration which indelibly marked the noble souls of Ancient India were later known by the general term Veda, simply "knowledge" or "understanding," though originally called Trayi Vidya or "three-fold wisdom" of hymns (Rig Veda), tunes (Sama Veda), and prayers (Yajur Veda), the whole being later on supplemented with the Atharva hymns dealing with domestic relations and exhorting the people's attention to secular duties. They soon came to have a certain recognized ritual, but their expression and instruction was for a long

time altogether orally carried on and, largely by monopoly and genealogical privilege as I will point out presently, became the basis of the Brahman's religious theory and practice, of which development the worst and most worldly feature was the vicious idea of caste. Indian history has been almost completely a mere footnote to the shrewd ritual but inexorable laws of caste—that vicious system which allows political and economic ravinage and injustice to flourish.

The first of the Vedas composed in a form approximating that of devotional hymns may be assigned to about 1500 B. C. and were offered up at the ceremonies celebrating such divinities as Indra, god of physical Nature; Agni, Fire; and Varuna, the personification of the serenity of the boundless heavens. These hymns were passed from generation to generation through "the richness of hearing" possessed by those who had memorized them, and as the traditions of vast virtue and noble endeavor were rendered immortal through vocal communication from knower to learner, so was there an actual kernel of truth in the Jaiminian doctrine of the *Sphota*, the phonetic eternity of spoken words (and sometime also of other sounds having significant or intelligible meanings). For almost a millenium there was neither a written hymnal nor a uniform ritual of religious practices and ceremonies, for although a crude form of written communication was perhaps used in the notes of daily affairs, there was no definite record made of religious rites or philosophical discussions. In this way then the Vedic hymns were held to a strictly mnemonic form of instruction and preservation, and were not recorded in any documentary form or manuscript until after about 600 B. C., when the sage Saunaka compiled a standard code of the grammatical and vocal peculiarities of the Vedic hymns and prayers, and thus ended whatever changes it is reasonable to believe had been often made by the endless array of memorizers and royal tutors. After Saunaka's time the religious literature for the most part consisted of theological and textual commentaries on these hymns and prayers, which are best to be divided into two classes: the Brahmanas (ritual codes) and the Upanishads (philosophical notes). The thorough understanding of either classification being soon beset by the false hermeneutics of esotericism and presumption.

The highest summit reached by these two forms of Vedic interpretation was respectively the exhortant worship offered up to, and the rationalized belief in Prajapati, Lord of All Creation, who,

under a sort of mono-panteism of law and administrative intelligence, represented the cosmic energy which is so clearly manifest in the creation and faithful maintenance of the visible universe. In this respect the Vedas served the highest of intellectual ambitions as well as the most reverent of religious aspirations, and as is shown by many of the prayers it was not always a merely anthropomorphic divinity to which an appeal for succor was made. Brahma the world-soul was the one Supreme Reality, and acting through the psychical principle of his Infinite Self, Atman, he was able to perform the spiritual works of his eternal preservation of all creation. He supervised all three of the cosmic functions making up the circle of birth, life and death, and was supposed to sanction the varying vicissitudes of human destiny. But we may well doubt whether the original Vedic teachings were in any way at fault for the miserable caste system which the subsequent Brahman priests so industriously maintained under the supposititious protection of their arbitrary god.

## II. UPANISHADS AND BRAHMANISM.

The name Upanished means "a setting down beside", and in this sense is justly applied to those brief philosophical notes which are the latest and most orderly compositions which were destined to survive the period of mnemonic instruction as brought to its highest development in the Vedas. They show the beginning of the transit from the visionary outpourings of the religious Hindu soul to a more unified attempt at bringing the diffused seeds of traditional wisdom into one consistent cycle of instruction, and in this unification were to be grouped up the esoteric meanings and speculative longings of the Vedists, worked out as psychological necessities to the purest and highest welfare of all humanity. For a long time, possibly about the four centuries preceding the time of Saunaka, this Upanishadic activity was going on orally from father to son, teacher to disciple, and it was not until the Sutra-writers began to flourish, about 500 B. C., that there was any written doctrine uniform and authoritative enough to hold its own. It was during this period that the so-called "Laws of Manu" were first codified and on his doctrine of Tapas, "meritorious pain," the cunning priests erected a whole ethic and sociology.

However, these sutra-writers were for the most part not spiritual but calligraphic innovators; the best of them were little other than plain compilers and editors of the Upanishadic teachings,

some of them giving emphasis to certain phases of these teachings, and others holding to a different attitude. It was thus that bases were laid for a various interpretation, and the two religions and the six or eight separate schools of philosophy arose. Some of the Upanishads are purely speculative and some are practical. A pure religious faith often shines through the fog of a gross polytheism while subjects of a cosmic philosophy are frequently drawn from the importuning testimony of secular affairs. But the general tone is one of upreach and glorious endeavor against the subtle evils and mediocre ambitions of our physical worldly life.

By virtue of the patient researches of both the native pandits and Western scholars there are now extant about 240 Upanishads, the most important of which are the Brihadāranyōkōpanishad and the Chandōgyopanishad which are constructed respectively on the prayers and chanteyes of the Yajur and Sama Vedas. But in the classical list, compiled about the first century B. C., there are about 27 or 29, the most philosophically important of which are the later compositions called the Vedantapanishad and the Yogopanishad, which originally consisted of esoteric remarks subjoined to the Brāhmanas, and thus making an advanced study of those sections known as the Arānyakas or Vedic speculative paragraphs. In these paragraphs various speakers are made to speculate on the nature and reality of Brahma's existence as the world-soul or divine principle operative in all things throughout the Universe; on the nature of Atman, the psychical principle manifested on earth the most highly in man, and hence to be analogously taken as the representative of the best and purest in the whole scheme of real things; and on the nature and function of Purusha, the Spirit of Selfhood which is not only the creative principle of Nature, but is also that power which makes knowledge and wisdom possible to human realization and practice.

Prof. A. E. Gough, in his "Philosophy of the Upanishads", tells us that the notion of the Samsara or transmigration was the prevalent belief of the primitive Hindus, and that this belief was encouraged for the most part by the pantheism of the earliest Indian theology. This then was the vague attitude toward the Deity until a few select philosophers began to recognize the necessity of ridding oneself of this vicious circle of existence from life to life and world to world. The one true remedy for this affliction is the attainment of perfect knowledge and divine wisdom, and there is a multitude of instructions on how this remedy is to be acquired and

put into practical use. Thus in the Mundâkyopanishad (II, 2-5): "Know thou that One Supreme Self who alone embounds the sky, the earth, atmosphere, mind, and all the vital breaths. Disclaim all other speech. This knowledge alone is the bridge over the gulf of this world to Immortality." In the Chandôgyopanishad (I, 15-18): "What a person does and thinks, that he inevitably becomes. Verily, this is a law of the Self; for it is *of It, in It*, and forever obtains throughout Its Infinite Perfection. The selfcontrolled sage should constantly devote himself to this Supreme Self. A man is all of a certain Idea, so that whatever Idea a man cherishes in this world, that he becomes in the next. Fix thyself, therefore, in the glorious Idea of the Supreme Self." And this in the Brihadâranyokopanishad (I, 9-11): "Whoever has no worldly desire and is beyond this desire; whoever has his true desire reaching toward and fulfilled in the Supreme Reality; whoever takes this Reality as the highest object of all (his efforts), his breath is not short, his aspiration is not vain. For, being calm in the tranquillity of Self, he becomes the Self indeed."

Brahmanism may be said to have originated in the mnemonic period when it was necessary to develop the memory to such a state of perfection that it would be as reliable a recording medium as a written manuscript. Certain families "rich in hearing" then made it a practice to thoroughly know all the poems and tunes of their tribe and community so that they could be preserved to future use, and by virtue of this superior knowledge, handed down from father to son, they soon came to a feeling that they had a right to exercise priestly functions at those occasions when hymns and prayers were offered up to the gods. In course of time such men grew more and more apart from "the profane reality of daily life" and with speculative ambitions to be under-lords of Brahma, the Supreme Reality both of gods and men, they gradually erected that artificial but nevertheless insuperable barrier between their own fortunate existence and the miserable lot of those unversed in the Vedic instructions. A worship of the phenomena of Nature was too open to public knowledge and practice, and the priestly officials were clever enough to see that something must be introduced which would render their ability more esoteric and their power over the rest of the people more secure. This desideratum was finally decided upon as that of mental culture and control, and with a discouragingly complex language and method of education their dominance was secured. The people became as nothing, even the

wealthy military princes were regarded as of little importance except as means of conquest or protection, while the priestly devotees of Brahma became all-powerful through nothing but pure assumption and pretense.

This is the clearest conclusion to be drawn from that document known as "The Laws of Manu", which takes it as a matter of course that the actual practice of Brahmanism is the recognition of caste in all things. The humble toiling Sudra serves the common people or merchant class, the common people look up to the martial Kshatriya as their beneficent protectors, while the Kshatriya must swear allegiance to the priests of Brahma as their immediate counsellors and spiritual leaders. All inter-caste relations are provided for with peculiar care that the higher has preference over the lower, special advantages being allowed where any certain political complex would stand a consistent chance of disrupting the system. The question then is left open whether or not the priests really and in truth have a pure reverence for the Supreme Reality of Brahma's existence, and whether or not it is their rightful freedom to be able to monopolize the knowledge and confidence of the Deity. It was their universal custom to consider all devotees of other sects or anyone else who sought to question their authority, as *Nastikas* or unbelievers, an epithet quite as potent in its effects as the Mohammedan term *Zendik*; but this application of the word later became narrowed down to only refer to the (to them) heretical *Tārikikas*, Buddhists, Jains, and the materialistic *Chārvakas*. Such an unfortunate as a slave, a twice-born Sudra, or an illegitimate issue of any lower caste morganatic relation, even though he were the most eagerly hopeful and aspiring, was totally beneath the Brahman's pride to notice.

On all these points of Vedic and Upanishadic teaching which were properly and improperly taken advantage of by the early formulators of Indian Religion and Philosophy, I will refer my readers to J. Muir's "Original Sanscrit Texts"; Paul Deussen's "Philosophy of the Upanishads"; Sir M. Monier-Williams' "Brahmanism and Hinduism"; and J. E. Carpenter's "Oriental Philosophy and Religion".

### III. GAUTAMA BUDDHA AND BUDDHISM.

It was the great distinction of Gautamā Siddartha Buddha (c. 620-543 B. C.) to come into the world at a time when this Brahmanical caste system was at its worst, and by instituting many

monastic centers of hospitable refuge he became known as far more a world-Saviour than the infinitely aloof Self of the Brahmans. A point was reached at this time when religious ceremonies and the securing of divine favor had to have a more practical bearing on public welfare and moral education. And as the distinction was now stringently emphasized between the chanting memory-power of the proud Brahmans and the ethical thinking of the few ascetics who were doing more real good in the world than the mere repetition of hymns and prayers could ever accomplish, it was an age well on its way to a new outlook on life and a keener inlook at the human soul, the power of its aspirations and the nature of its destiny. To be able to think and act nobly became now the ideal manner of life, and if it was naturally and really right that such a course should be pursued, it was with a new zest and delicious intuition that the monastic thinkers handled their mental and spiritual powers. It is a point of departure delightfully brought out by T. W. Rhys Davis in his scholarly works on the beginnings of Buddhism.

The singular character around which these spiritual changes came to their strongest focus was Buddha, the sage of the Sakya tribe, the enlightened one, he of the "accomplished understanding", to name a few of his various titles. Leaving aside all the various contentions of Buddhistic docetists and historicists, we find that he himself did not answer to the name Buddha, not even his personal name, Prince Siddartha, but cleaved rather to the far more modest title Arahat, "he who has arrived". Probably due more to the proselyting ambitions of the Mahāyana sect than to the historical researches of the Hinyanans, there has been a great deal of controversy over the dates of his life; but so far as the haphazard Hindu chronology will allow, it seems fairly certain that he was born near the Nepaul border about 620 B. C., and died at Kusināgara about 543 B. C. or somewhere near his eightieth year.

Nevertheless, Buddha lived to be one of the great pioneers of the Ashtampada or Eight-fold Path of Truth and Righteousness which comprised a pure rectitude of viewpoint, aspiration, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and ecstasy; and aimed at knowing the true causes of human misery, and at knowing the exact and most practical method of freeing men from all this personal misery and worldly travail. It is assumed, however, that there are no "necessary evils" in the world, these being in truth those vices, delusions or other absurd customs which we are unwilling to give up, and which, from our assumption of necessary

intellectual content and actional maintenance, work great evil upon our otherwise glorious freedom of spiritual growth and aspiration. The attainment of this emancipation from delusion and evil is the one supreme purpose of all meditation, moral austerity and public duty or virtuous conduct. Of course, when we first assay to make personal reformation of ourselves, there come readily to our hand the Pancha Bala, or the five negative moral powers: faith in the divine, mental energy, memory, meditation, and worldly wisdom, which very usefully serve to prevent the increase of the evil that already exists, but do not and cannot do more than this. It remains for a deeper activity, a keener self-obliteration and a surer grasp of the true reality underlying the nature of things, to come to the actually accomplishing method of personal salvation.

Holding, therefore, that the very conditions and constituents which go together to make us up as individuals, are as well at the same time the very things which constitute the source of each individual's subsequent misery and travail; the emancipation from this suffering must somehow be brought about through freeing the mind and body of the desires and cravings which have become habitual to their affective natures. And the very first requisite is to see that these desires and appetites have become habitual and customary through our finitude of mind, through our self-centered pride and ignorance, through our shallow myopic view of life, and through even the source itself of these characters—the individuality of our personal selfishness. Accordingly then, the denial of all soul-theories, and even their actual negation in practice, is the first mental discipline to be achieved, for all further progress on the Path is impossible except as this first obstacle, or any other similar set of notions, is clearly understood and overcome. With Buddha and his immediate followers egoism was condemned, not because of its external evil effects upon our pursuit of the social *Ethos*, but for the ultimate reason that it brings about the unhappiness and lonely misery of the individual himself. Thus is there a personal appeal to everyone to correct his own shortcomings and take heart to save himself an eternity of futile toil and trouble.

In the Samkhya philosophy, which native tradition claims is older than Buddhism, but which chronologically appears to have been rather a worthy and significant contemporary movement, Kapila had emphasized the notion that there exists in every living being a soul which is uncreated and eternal, but Buddha denied the absolute eternity of soul, for when the individual, whether or not

conceived as a soul, has become purified and free of all desire and idea of desire, it has reached a state of non-psyhic content, in other words it has reached Nirvana whose principal characteristic is that of Sunyatā, vacuity or nothingness. This destiny was very similarly regarded by the Jainists, except that Nirvana was not so much a zone of absolute negation as it was a sphere of absolutely non-human forms of being, reality and aspects of truth. Buddha further argued that there is no real existent known as soul; that is, no immortal substances or spirit, for such a reality or its concept is altogether incompatible, foreign and (properly speaking) inconceivable where all is individual existence in a sphere of finite mental power.

This feeling that we are living in a sphere of mental if not absolute finitude was the ground for Buddha, on the other hand, to agree with Kapila in holding that there is no adequate proof of the existence of a Supreme Deity, and of whom therefore we cannot predicate as being responsible for any so-called creation or first cause of the Universe. It was an "argument from below", that is from the finite, human point of view, resulting in short in what the dogmatic Brahmans immediately branded as atheism, for Buddha was going about teaching that there is no Being, Anatman, that rather that the whole Universe is a vast scene of pure Becoming, causing impermanence to be one of the foremost signs of our individual life, and that the Brahman's Sruti or Vedic Revelation as well as the Jainist Tattvika or True Possession (of wisdom) are at last only productions of our impermanent finitude. It was purely a remnant of truth which was possible to human attainment, and this was Moksha, freedom through moderate reason and contemplative diligence in the right perspective. Buddhism then was altogether negative in its metaphysic, but was serenely noble and positive in its ethic. As a speculative doctrine of Reality and non-human Truth it was its own most obstinate obstacle, but a practical meliorism of humanity's mundane condition it served many of our highest aims and secured to men the encouragement of upward effort.

Among the foremost followers and advocates of Buddhism may be named Maha Moggallāna (or Maudgalāvadhā) and Asōka Vārdhana, the Painless. Though a Brahman by birth, Moggallāna yet became one of Buddha's most able disciples, flourishing during the fourth century B. C. He became prominent largely through his elaboration of the notion of Iddhi or potency which,

as a worldly unenlightened power gives men the practical capacities for ruling as kings, performing miracles, or inventing useful things, as well as giving them talent for success in life and to be generally fortunate in all enterprises. But as a divinely enlightened and scrupulously cultivated power it makes us capable of religious wisdom, self-control, and a happy companionship with the gods of Nature, whence we may enjoy that rare freedom from worldly ambition, ignorance and selfish strife.

Asôka, however, was far more constructive while at the same time being truly representative of the original Buddhist principles. Being the grandson of the famous Chandra-gupta, the Moon-protected (the Sandrokryptos who successfully opposed the Macedonian invasion of India), Asôka became king of Kalingâ and was emperor of northern India for forty years, 272-231 B. C. Even with the great Brahmanical influences which in this regal capacity he was brought under, his conversion to Buddhism becomes all the more strange and unique owing to the fact that early in life he was a strict Saivist or devotee of the goddess Siva the Destroyer, and believed religiously in the propriety of animal sacrifice and the worship of the divine ruthlessness so manifest throughout the natural world. It clearly shows nevertheless that all mental growth is usually first a destruction of existent conceptions and institutions, and later begins to look for constructive elements and newer outlooks on life. Buddhism was not a flourishing religion before Asôka's time because there had been from the very start many sects wrangling over the authority each of them had or was supposed to have received from the Buddha himself. We might very well consider that the secret of Asôka's great success in unifying and stabilizing the contending factions of his wide domain was, not the pious passivity which characterized Buddha's famous protector, King Bimbisara, but the equally pious but far more positive and constructive achievement he made in the propagation of Jainini's philosophy of Dharma, the Law of Right and Truth. According to the construction he put upon Dharma, the caste system was utterly rejected and a general toleration established regarding all the numerous political and religious variations of opinion even so including non-Buddhist and Srutist elements that they could not but value Asôko's reign as truly the Augustan era of Indian prosperity and culture. Eclectics and syncretists were in high demand.

However, this ethical law was not to be completely established

from without, as by means of legal regulation, but was introduced and encouraged on the ground that it must, if it was to be at all a real achievement, be ever supported from within, that is by means of an inward purification and sense of rectitude. For it is not mere law-obedience but piety of heart and modesty of mind that is destined to gain the righteous way in human life. Respect for the truth in all matters, respect for one's parents and the government under which life is preserved in peace and prosperity, respect for the rest of humanity, and a due regard for the right of every form of life to live out the natural course of its existence—these were the four primary duties; and in an ethical system such as Buddha taught and Asôka established, these duties were not to be rated nor yet practiced in any but a clear and reverent spirit, for was not their very foundation to be had only in purity of heart and calm serenity of mind? The substance of all this noble instruction was too enduring to be abandoned or lost, but Asôka desired a lasting impression should be made upon the people's memories. Hence are the principal points of the original Buddhist teaching preserved to us almost complete in their original form of expression which was the Seven Pillar Inscriptions in the near provinces, and the Fourteen Rock Edicts chiselled in rock about 256 B. C. at seven different places in the outer provinces.

A faithful and scholarly translation of these inscriptions has been made into English by Vincent A. Smith in a volume entitled "Asôko, the Buddhist Emperor of India" (1901).

(To be Continued)