

MEDITATION ON PLATO AND BUDDHA

A little less than one hundred years after the Enlightened One had entered into Nirvana, between the twin Sala-trees at Kusinara, the creator of Western Idealism was walking in the cool garden of Academus, surrounded by his devoted followers, and his eyes fixed on the Sacred Road, leading in an elegant spiral toward the glory of the Parthenon—was expounding to them the doctrine of Ideas, pure, eternal and immutable dreams of the Unknown—*Noemata Teou*.

Life was an uninterrupted series of sorrows for Buddha, because “Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, illness is suffering and death is suffering” and the cause of this endless pain is thirst, desire. It is natural therefore that the goal of existence should be cessation of suffering through destruction of desire. . . .

Plato says in “Theaetetus”: “We must strive to escape as quickly as possible from this life to the abode of the gods.” That is the reason why death is not dreadful to Socrates; with a smile on his lips he proves to Phedon, to Cebes and to the weeping Criton that to die means to abandon the prison of the perishable body and to regain forlorn liberty in the realm of the Beautiful, and the Pure and the Eternal.

“The life of a philosopher,” says Cicero, “is a constant meditation on death. He detaches himself from everything earthly, everything transient and vain. To detach one’s spirit from the body and its requirements, is it not to learn how to die?”

But while death for the Perfect One meant before anything else extinction of desire and cessation of pain,—death for Plato was a return after a painful and trying journey to the radiant Homeland, where every glance embraced beauty, every breath inhaled love and existence was an

uninterrupted bliss and harmony. The galley-slave only thinks of escaping from his torture—even at the cost of suicide—while the exile, worn away by nostalgia, languishingly dreams of his lost fatherland.

The Greeks, like all Orientals, knew well what the wheel of life meant and the cycle of rebirths and, judging from the works of Olimpiodore, Servius, Plutarch, Maximus of Tyre and many others, the main object of ancient Mysteries in Greece as well as in Egypt, was the purification of the believer with the intention of exonerating him from future rebirths. The “yste” was only treading the path, but the true “epopt” was believed to have conquered immortality; he was supposed to have escaped further rebirth by drinking the cup of Lethe and vanishing into oblivion.

The platonic ideas of birth, death, reincarnation and final salvation were inspired by Orphic Mysteries and Orphic Mysteries were the hellenised Dionysian cult of Thrace. Thrace got her occult doctrines from Phrygia and Asia Minor (cult of Attis and Cybele). Here we lose the trail and must stop or venture on hypothetical grounds.

Summing up the philosophical teachings of Buddha and Plato we come to the following two conclusions:

1. Metaphysically both opposed the world of “Becoming,” to the world of “Being,” the “genesis,” to the “ousia,” denying to the first ontological reality and recognising the impossibility for human intelligence, for reason to comprehend the second.

2. Ethically they acknowledged reincarnation, as the only justification of earthly endurances and as the only moral foundation of life.

It is possible to assert that to a certain degree every esoteric doctrine (Judaism excepted), whether taught in India, in Egypt, in Gallia (Druides), in Persia, or in Greece, invariably imparted to disciples the primordial truth on the ontological conditionality of the empirical world and the unbroken continuity, nay the identity of birth and death.

Allowing their part to a few exceptions (such as the Sarvastivadins, who believed in the reality of dharmas) the rule seems to be that the degree of unreality of phenomena varied with different schools. So, the early Buddhist systems in India allowed more reality to particulars than the transitory schools of Relativism, which were in their turn surpassed by the later idealists who considered matter a mere product of thought.

The same thing can be observed in Greece not only in different schools, but in the very bosom of Platonism. In his early teachings Plato considered that things participated in ideas and ideas communed with phenomena.

This world was like a Jacob's ladder with a constant ascending and descending movement, a flow from the objects of senses toward the self-existence of things, called "participation" (metenhis) and an ebb back from the eternal essences down to the particulars, called "communion" (parousia). Later Platonism denies "participation" and believes in "likeness" of things and ideas. In "Parmenides" and "Philebus" this world is only a reflexion of the true world. "What a superior being would conceive as subjective thought, the inferior perceives as objective things."¹ Finally in "Timaeus" it is expressly stated that the world of ideas is the Thought of the Universal Mind, while phenomena are only thoughts of this Thought. If the world of Asanga or Vasubandhu (of the later period) can be called a dream,—the world of developed Platonism is merely a dream in a dream.

Plato of the same period openly enunciates what must have been the conviction of Buddha: that absolute ideas cannot be apprehended by conditional beings and that *vice-versa* the Unconditioned cannot apprehend relative phenomena. That explains the silence of Buddha on metaphysical topics.

¹ Otto Rosenberg says that for the Vaibhashika the True Being was dwelling outside of the Empirical Being; the phenomenal being was only its reflexion. (Problem.)

Vimalakīrti responded with silence to questions regarding the Absolute and Mañjuśrī approved him, exclaiming: "Well done. Non-duality is above words." Buddha and Plato both knew that for human thought discerning always means "dichotomising"—forming simultaneously two opposing concepts.

We would venture here the following comparison: For Plato the Real Existence, whose transcendental perfection is disclosed to us in an incomplete way in the worldly reflexion, was something like the "Ālaya" for the Yogācāra school—the all-containing Cosmic Mind, where the germs of all things, existing there in ideality, were stored up. Phenomena for Plato became real only in the Absolute—they were "parinishpanna." There is no doubt that the latter Platonic conceptions of the world were monistic. Those were the days when Socratic and Heraclitean influences were retiring to the background and the author of the "Laws" was returning to the pure, uncompromising unity of eleatic metaphysics and when he was undergoing the mysterious ascendancy of Pythagoras.

As Confucius in the last years of his life was enraptured by the occult enigmas of the Book of Changes, so was the aging Plato under the spell of Pythagoras' mathematical asceticism.

Now, strange to say, monism and metapsychosis go well hand in hand. The only uncompromisingly dualistic religion—Judaism ignores reincarnation. So does orthodox Mahomedanism. Dualistic Greek systems (Ionian) also never professed that doctrine. It came with the Eleusian Mysteries imported from Asia Minor and from Pythagorean asceticism, no doubt also of Oriental proceeding. Reincarnation is the ethical counterpart of spiritualistic monism. The dream of life goes on through endless phases until the constituent elements, the nourishing impulses of this phantasmagory are not entirely exhausted.

Christianity occupies a transitory position between

realistic Judaism and the mystic teachings of the Orient adopted by esoteric "Hellas." Christ never denounced reincarnation, though he never taught it either. There are a few indirect proofs, as everybody knows, of Him admitting rebirth (the blind-born). We only want to emphasise the point that He considered it to be an esoteric teaching, a doctrine not to be thrown open to the public. That is the reason why, while declaring straightforwardly that St. John Baptist was an incarnation of prophet Elijah he adds the following reservations:

1. If you are *ready* to accept the idea and
2. Let him who *has ears* listen.^{1,2}

This is quite plain. Reincarnation for Him was an occult teaching, just like in the Greek Mysteries. That is also the reason why some people understood His last words on the cross—"Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani."—while others misunderstanding them interpreted them in an outrageous way:—"My God, why have You forsaken me?"—which would be a negation, a disavowal of Christ's whole life and teaching. These words were addressed to "the greatest among men born of women," to His spiritual teacher, to the "guru" of Christ who initiated Him (as the Romans understood very well),³ the Elijah—St. John. According to the doctrines of the Mysteries our teacher, our special guardian, acts as our "psychopomp," i.e. he assists us at the death hour, he helps us through Hades. This idea is clearly expressed by Plato in "Phedon" and in the "Republic."

All hybrid sects in Syria—semi-Christian, semi-Mahomedan—believed in reincarnation. That was and still is the "profession de foi" of the Druses and Ansariae. The Christian Maronites also believe in reincarnation. The Fathers of early Christianity rejected the doctrine (except

¹ Matthew 99, (14-15).

² St. Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians says: "I feed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it."

³ Matthew 27, (42).

Origenus and to a certain extent Clement of Alexandria) only on account of their bitter hatred of "the heathen mysteries" and especially of Mitraism—their most dangerous enemy. Everything taught by paganism necessarily came from the Evil One. Gnosticism, this anti-jewish syncretism of Platonism, Philonism, Egyptian mystery cult, and Christianity mixed with Buddhist echoes, naturally believed in it.

The great difference between the Greek and Buddhist transmigration doctrine consists in the fact, that the first is a "metempsychosis," while the latter is rather a "metasomatosis" (from soma—the body). Pre-Buddhist thought was animistic and therefore nearer to Greece. Both anyhow are produced by Karma. In that respect Platonism and Hinduism are nearly identical. Pythagoras taught that the bonds which tie up our soul are our words and deeds. "Everything that happens to us—" says Cicero—"is caused by implacable laws of causality." Plato symbolises Karma by a boat, which is guided to Hades by our previous deeds. In the "Laws" he says: "Only our deeds accompany us after death, their consequences then clearly appear to us, they are our judges, they determine our future destiny." All these doctrines might have possibly originated in India and have travelled to Greece via Asia Minor and Egypt. There is however one typical feature in the esoteric doctrines of Greece, which distinguishes them from those taught in India, Egypt and Babylon. Here is the unperishable monument which Hellenese culture has erected to itself. Homer, Pindar, Euripides, Sophocles, Phidias and Praxiteles might sink into oblivion, but until the light of humanism is not extinguished among men, the idea of the Greek "psyche" will remain alive in their hearts.

The undying glory of Greece consists in having introduced between the abstract, infinite and undeterminate Spirit and the concrete, perishable, finite body a third element participating of both—the sweet, emotional, lovable.

purely-human and all-too-human Soul. With a few exceptions the whole of Greek art, literature and philosophy are the outcome of this discovery. The peculiar Greek "psyche" was unknown to the Hebrews and to early Egyptians. The Hebrews had the concept of "Neshoma," which however means "breath," "pneuma" and stands for spirit. It is the breath which God inhaled in man when creating him. It is the individualised "pneuma agion," the Holy Ghost, who, by the way, was female and called "Rouah." The Holy Ghost originally was the feminine part of the Divine Androgyne and lost his or rather her sex only in the second century A. D. during the struggle of the Church against the Gnostics. The principle of vitality was located by the Hebrews in the blood. They also seem to have had an intuition about the subtle "astral" body. When Samuel appears to Saul, it is his "shadow," his "linga-sharira" which is evoked by the white Endora. An immortal soul is never mentioned in the Bible, and a first hint of it appears only in the second century B.C. in the Book II Maccabee. The same applies to the ancient Egyptians. Their "Ka" is the ethereal double of the dead, his "perispit," but not his soul.¹

The question is much more complicated in India where endless systems flourished. The Sankhya recognised a kind of soul called "anthakarana"—a product of Buddhi (reason), "ahankara" (self-assertion), Manas (heart), and the inner organs of senses. Sir Charles Eliot says: "It practically corresponds to what we call the soul, though totally distinct from Purusha or soul in the Sankhya sense." We venture to contend that this carrier of various psychological tendencies is rather the "linga sharira" under another aspect, the "astral body," the vehicle of Karma and not the soul-psyche. Now Purusha is Spirit, as opposed to Prakriti (everything expressible in forms of matter and motion). It corresponds to Atman. The Sankhya soul rather reminds the gnostic

¹ The nearest Egyptian ideograph for "soul" is usually translated as "heart." (Tiankoff: *The Heart in Egyptian Inscriptions.*)

soul of Basilides. Clement of Alexandria compared her to the horse of Troy, as containing endless armies of component elements. The Gnostics, as well as the animistic systems of India, recognised a polypsychic ego, thus paying the way to the Buddhist skandha theory. Modern psychology under the leadership of Jung with his doctrine of individual and collective subconsciousness makes a well-marked step to join hands with old Indian animistic conceptions.

Other Indian systems mention *Jiva*, which is rather vitality, or *Kama-rupa*, passion-body or form. The *Pasupatas* were *Sivaites* who believed in an individual soul—"pasu" and also in an ethereal body, bearer of Karma, called "pasa," limited by five envelopes. This soul however remains rather a Spirit temporarily engrossed with corporeal impediments.

In the *Taittiriya Upanishad* the soul is a substance formed by five concentric layers; the outer envelop is crude material, then comes breath, spirit, consciousness and bliss.

Buddhism is an-atta, recognising no substratum underlying the phenomena of life. The expression "atman" is however often used and even "paratman," for instance in the *Jataka-Mala*. This is the rule, subject to exceptions. So the *Sammytias* believed in an individual soul. The *Vasiputriya* school believed in a true ego. Three worlds are mentioned in the *Abhidharma* (this refers also to the microcosmos)—the gross body, the ethereal body and the spiritual world. "Pudgala" referred to in the *Sammyuta Nikaya* as the "porter" of skandhas is rather a kind of transitory personality, like the "aham" of the Brahmins. The "gandarva"—one of the three elements forming new life with the father and mother is a somewhat obscure conception. *Alaya* of the *Yogacara* school is the "dwelling point."¹ It is Spirit, pure Consciousness. *The Maha-Paranirvana Sutra* recognises a True Ego (in Japanese *Shin Ga*) as a metaphysical entity identical to the Cosmic Truth, to Buddha.

¹ Something like the *Logos* was for Philo.

There was a distinct hesitation on all these matters in early Christian thought; the point is perhaps not yet quite clear. St. Paul was the first to proclaim the trinitary composition of man—body, soul, spirit.¹ Here his Hellenistic tendencies had the upper hand over his Hebrew atavism.

It was really a “*trait de génie*” of Greek intuitive thought to connect distant divinity—which roughly taken is conceived by humanity under two aspects, either as an anthropomorphised super-man with his passions sublimised, or as a cold, abstract principle—with the perishable world of phenomena by an intermediary element, divine and human “*à la fois*,” which became the focus of human aspirations and the aim-object, of Celestial inspirations. The idea of “*psyche*” is the smile of Greece. Here divinity manifests itself through love and humanity exalts itself through virtue. The soul is the struggling ground between God and Nature. It is the anchor-ground of the Ideas,—the meeting field of “*visibles*” and “*invisibles*.” It is the soul element which is responsible for the Greek craving for Beauty and their burst for Joy. C. A. F. Rhys Davids on the other hand speaks of “*the absence of joy in the forward view*” in Buddhism.²

Plato’s philosophy is the voice of beauty-loving and life-enjoying Greece. For him “*psyche*” was the enduring, permanent element underlying the process of phenomena; permanent, but not eternal, because from the platonic viewpoint after all purifications of the soul were over, attained by a series of reincarnations, this soul, entirely dematerialised and freed from corporeal fetters became pure essence and met God face to face in the spiritual heaven. This meant becoming a Hypostised Idea. A careful perusal of the somewhat obscure works of Jamblicus, Proclus, Por-

¹ First letter to the Thessalonians.

² T. Oltramare (*Histoire des Idées Théosophiques dans l’Inde*) accuses them of having such horror of external beauty, that it even transpires in their style. (p. 527.)

phyry and especially Sinesius seem to reveal the following picture of Greek esoteric eschatology: The deeds, desires and thoughts of a human being form a kind of ethereal garb round his soul (called the chariot in "Phaedre"). This "proton kinoum" is distinctly the Indian Karma. After death this vehicle driven by the law of "affinities" carries the soul to an almost identical envelope; here the soul incarnates in a new body, expiating the errors of its past existence through being compelled to live in a body, whose physiological and psychological dispositions are suitable for this redemption work. This is somewhat similar to the "avakranti" of the Mahayanists—a descent of the embryonic "vijñāna" in a womb congruous to its Karma.

Sinesius says: "The soul lives in its former ethereal body." This would mean that through our actions and thoughts in this life we spin and weave the soul-dress of our future existence. We undo the Karma of the past life and elaborate the one of the future.

Greek metempsychosis, though reposing on slightly arbitrary ground is more logical than Buddhist metempsychosis. The hypothesis of a permanent substratum underlying individual life once admitted, the later developments are easily understood. It is much more difficult for a westerner to grasp what transmigrates from body to body if there is no ego, and still more incomprehensible how under those circumstances Buddha can identify himself, a Bodhisattva or any other sentient being with some one having existed many thousand times and many million years ago. It was certainly not himself if there is no self. This seems to be logic. What transmigrates under the Buddhist system is the Karma, the "character" of man, or as the Greeks would put it—his ethereal body pervaded with all his deeds and tendencies, his vehicle, his chariot.¹ But if through con-

¹ Prof. Otto Rosenberg (*Problemen du Buddhistischen Philosophie*) maintains that it is not the soul which migrates from body to body, but the same Dharma-complex, which reappears as a personality illusion.

stant repairs (purification, undoing of past karma in new incarnations) the wheels, then the springs, the shafts, the couch-box, the stuff of the seats, etc., of this carriage are changed, nothing will remain of the car after a certain lapse of time. If therefore an owner of such a real, material car, having belonged to a famous ancestor, would claim after, say, two hundred years that he still owns the car of his great-grand-father it would be a sheer play on words. What would remain would be the vague form of it with the remembrance, the idea of it, but certainly not the car. Is that what remains of men in the process of reincarnations? It seems to be so. The ideas of these cars (to keep up our comparison) are stored up like seeds in the general storehouse of the *Ālaya*, or say, Cosmic Consciousness; when all the component parts of these individual cars are worn out, the idea of them remains eternally in the stream of the Universal Mind.

The introduction of this intermediary element of "psyche," as distinct from spirit and from the material and ethereal bodies, was a prop for the development of ethics in Greece and was instrumental in creating an uncomparable art. If the doctrine of reincarnation came from the East, which is highly probable, the Greeks have rationalised it—which is a characteristic feature of Hellenistic culture; they have at the same time imbued it with a deeply emotional and intensely poetical spirit. The "psyche" became not only the justification of virtue, but also the instigator of beauty.

So we have seen that Platonism in its cosmo-conception is akin to idealistic Buddhism (*Vijñāna-vada*) and accepts also, with slight modifications, the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation. There is a third and very important factor in common both to Oriental and Greek thought: it is the conception of Wisdom, of Knowledge.

We know that Socrates identified wisdom with virtue. Professor Paul Oltramare is right in saying: "For Buddhism just as for all Socratic schools one is unable of virtue

if one has no knowledge." We also know that this wisdom could only be attained by insight, by introspection, *gnoti sauton*. Just like every Zen Buddhist Socrates seeks the science of the good and self-possession. He strives toward an agreement, a harmony with himself. Socrates exerts himself in order to distinguish the general essence of things, the "ti esti." And he finds it in himself. "Gnoti sauton" means penetration into the depth of oneself, beyond the particular and transient in order to discover the identical and permanent. As Emile Boutroux puts it: "Socrates strives to free man through the knowledge of man." And silence must reign in the human heart, so that man may listen to the word of divinity. Plato follows in the footsteps of his master. For him also man liberates himself through wisdom. Knowledge is the path which leads man back to the lost Fatherland. Knowledge delivers: that means that if humanity is struggling in this valley of sorrows it is through ignorance—*avidyā*, or as Plato would work it: "For having forgotten." The oblivion of Plato is the ignorance of Buddha.

Now it is a remarkable thing that while nearly all esoteric teachings recognised reincarnation as an ethical justification of the shortcomings of Life, they nearly all in the domain of metaphysics opposed Knowledge to Life. Judaism is an individualistic, dualistic, and rationalistic religion, practically the opposite pole of Buddhist monism, idealism and universalism, but nevertheless the same primordial doctrine of an eternal hostility, an incompatibility between knowledge and life can be distinguished under the obscure symbols of the Bible. We live—which means we suffer because we are ignorant and as long as we are ignorant, true wisdom implies the cessation of the phenomenon called "life."

People are inclined to read the first chapters of Genesis without paying due notice to the deep metaphysical teaching hidden behind the symbol of the two trees in Paradise.

Right in the centre of the Garden were planted two trees—the tree of Wisdom and the tree of Life. While and because man was permitted to enjoy the fruits of the tree of Life (it means to live eternally) he had to abstain from eating the fruits of knowledge. To partake of both is the privilege of gods (Elohim). When Adam and Eva disobeyed the commandment of God, he chased them out of Paradise, “lest they put forth their hands and take also from the tree of Life and eat and live forever . . . and become one of us.” God puts a Cherouim with a drawn sword at the gate “. . . to keep them now (i.e., after they had tasted the fruit of knowledge) off the tree of Life.” Two metaphysical principles are expressed here. The first is that God is the identity of Being and Thought, or of Life and Knowledge as it is put in the Bible. The second is that human beings have to choose between life and knowledge. Man lost his bliss and immortality (Paradise) because he partook of the fruit of Wisdom. He became mortal because he knew. Knowledge destroys life. Consciousness is the flame which burns and consumes the oil of vitality in the lamp of existence. Not only do we “burn away our works in the fire of knowledge,” to use an expression of Ananda Coomaraswami, but we consume in “gnosis” the very principle of “bios.”

As the ambition of every Buddhist is to put a stop to the “samsara,” to be delivered from life which is sorrow (dukkha), he must strive to attain true knowledge. And the object of knowledge for Buddha, just as for Plato, was the permanent, unchanging being, while the plurality of transient phenomena were only the subject of “opinion.” What Plato calls “opinion,” opposing it to knowledge, Indians call “illusion,” opposing it to “Ultimate Truth.”

The same voice reaches us, coming from the luxuriant Indian jungles, from the barren Syrian desert and from the smiling hill of the Museion, proclaiming the same metaphysical truth, enunciating the same principle underlying the mystery of life: Phenomenal existence is the fruit of

ignorance; this is tantamount to saying that it really "is" not. It appears, it is a dream, from which knowledge awakens us. As Gaudapada says in his hymn :

"It is in the beginningless illusion of the world
 "That the soul indeed sleeps; when it awakes
 "Then there awakes in it the eternal. . . ."

That is why Śākya Muni is called the Buddha, which means the Awakened One.¹ The Neo-Platonists used the same term for their Bodhisattvas, for their intermediaries between the Unknown and humanity, calling these entities "egregoroi," i.e., the waking ones. That meant not only that they had a constant eye upon us, that they were vigilant, but it emphasised their position in contradistinction to the human soul, which was not awake, but sunken in the dream of life.

There is another fundamental Buddhist doctrine which reminds in a way the current of Platonic thought. It is the Chain of Causation called "pratitya samutpada." The phenomenal world is the result of beginningless causal series, necessary causes producing necessary effects, the series starting with nescience and finishing with death. The world is not an accumulation of independent things, but a chain of unseparable correlations. This theory, as Stecherbatsky has pointed out, resembles the modern law of co-ordination of point-moments (Funktionelle Abhaengigkeit). Now if we turn backwards (as it is done in the Digha Nikāya and by Burnouf in his *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*) the wheel of causation from effects to causes, we discover first of all that death is caused by the fact of birth, and then at the end of the series of twelve "Nidanas" that nescience produces concepts (samskaras). This formula is quite Platonic. Plato teaches in "Phedon" that all things originate from their contraries, that the whole sensible world is nothing else than an interplay of opposing forces, originating one from the other, generating and succeeding one another. He proves in this way that life and death cannot

¹ In Russian "to wake" is "Buddhist."

be an exception to the general rule and must necessarily produce each other. Life is the cause of death and death must therefore also be the cause of a new life. Life and death are mere phases of one unbroken process. This is the same as the words of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita :

“For to the born sure is death, to the dead sure is birth.” What distinguishes perhaps the Platonic conception of the cycle of existences from the early Buddhist view is that for Plato there was nothing mechanic, automatic (caused by the implacable law of karma) in this cycle. It was moved, fostered by a vital principle. It was not a vicious circle, but rather a spiral. Nothing like an electric wave objectifying itself when the corresponding receiver is struck. It was the very movement of manifested life, an “*élan vital*.” In this respect early Buddhism was nearer to modern science in its law of dependent generation (*pratitya samutpada*), reminding for instance of Heidenheim’s views on causation, while Platonism reminds us of the doctrines of modern creative evolution. (Bergson.)

Historians have often laid stress on various influences exercised on Plato by preceding philosophers, such as Socrates, Heraclites, Parmenides, Pythagoras and the school of Megara founded by Euclides, disciple of Socrates. It is usually admitted that during the early period of his activity Plato was rather under the influence of Socrates and to a certain extent of Heraclites, while during his last decade, when the “*Republic*,” “*Philebus*” and the “*Laws*” were written he was more inclined toward the mystic speculations of Pythagoras and the Eleatic doctrine of Unity. We find therefore in the early creation of the founder of the Academy more affinities with early Buddhist, nearly Heraclitean views on the world, reminding of a cinema—endless tornados of “*moments*,” while his last dialogues sound nearly Mahayana-like, when he contemplates the immovable and unalterable essence of Truth. The difference is that Plato’s thought is never formless or “*beingless*.” Like Descartes he thinks of

God in geometrical figures. And He alone 'is'; His thoughts are self-existent (auta kat' auta eide). He is the sole cause of the mirage of "becoming things."

It has been claimed by some scholars that Pythagoras had either been in India or that he had studied Sankhya philosophy and Sir William Jones pointed out that Sankhya means "numbers." The monistic system of the Eleatics has been compared with the teachings of the Upanishads (Garbe: *The Philosophy of India*). Colebrook says the same about Heraclites. Interesting studies have been made on the question in how far Indian thought had influenced Greece, Egypt and Palestine by Lassen, Ueberweg, Arthur Lloyd, von Schroeder, Edmunds and many others; it is however difficult to come to definite conclusions. Two points anyhow are absolutely evident:

1. Over three hundred years before Christ Indian philosophy was known in the Near East. (King Asoka, for instance, sent missionaries to Syria, Egypt, Macedonia and Epirus).

2. There was constant trade going on between the eastern basin of the Mediterranean and India and Taprobone (Ceylon).

On the first point we might quote "entre autre" Arrien's *History of Alexander the Great*, recounting how Alexander was struck by the life and teaching of the Indian ascetics he met in Gandhara and Panjab and how he took a few of them along with the retreating army. They were called by the Greeks "gymnosophists." It is absolutely clear who those men were. Gymnosophist means "naked philosopher." We know that the naked sages of those days were the Jains. In many sutras Buddha recommended not to follow their example. These Jains settled down in Greek possessions and in Egypt. Some ruins have been lately discovered by an American Society of Archeologists near the Red Sea shore, which are thought to be settlements of those gymnosophists. It is perhaps an exaggeration to presume

that the Essenes, Therapeutae, Nazariens and Ebionites were Buddhists (v. the works of William King, Reitzenstein, Litzbarsky, etc.,) and the little we know about them based on Philo and Josephus seems rather to indicate that they were Jewish sectarians, who while remaining faithful to the Law had been impressed by the merciful, pure and austere contemplative communism of early Buddhists or Jains and led the life of Bhikkhus, professing at the same time belief in the Old Testament.

We also know that Pyrrho of Elis had followed Alexander to India and that when he came back he founded his school of skepticism and relativism, which in its doctrines of "ataraxia" (imperturbability), "acatalepsia" (agnosticism) and "afasia" (non-committal silence) had a distinctly Indian flavour. As a matter of fact it was nearly exactly the doctrines of the Syadvadins also favoured by the Jains.

On the subject of constant commercial relations between the countries of the Near East and India it is well known that both Greek dynasties, the Seleucides and the Ptolemaeans communicated with India. So Selenius of Antioch sends Megasthenes to the court of Patna, while Ptolemy Evergetus despatches Daimachus and Dionysius Caludus Ptolemy (the geographer) gives detailed descriptions of India in his Geography, based on reports from merchants who often visited that country. Most interesting is the story of a merchant Eudoxe, related by Strabon. He travelled constantly between the Red Sea ports of Egypt and India. He once brought along from India a piece of carved wood representing the head of a horse. It proved to be the prow of a boat. Some time later he learned that such boats were used by natives from Cyrenaica, in the gulf of Gades. This opened his eyes on the possibility of reaching India by travelling round Africa. He discovered that North-West Africa was also busily trading with India. He started on a journey round Africa, from Alexandria, with a ship full of goods, young slaves, musicians, physicians and artisans, but

the ship was wrecked and stranded somewhere on the west coast of Africa.

To make the story short, we know from the same Strabon that Ptolemy Philadelphus dug a canal between the Nile and the Red Sea to facilitate communication with India. Ethiopia and Arabia and that about twenty ships a year plied between the Red Sea ports and India.

But there is a canonical book called *Liber Sapientiae Salomonis* (The Book of Wisdom) probably composed in Alexandria some 100 years B. C. which is a typical example of Indo-Hellenico-Hebraic syncretism. This beautiful simile-pearl has been set in the austere mounting of the Old Testament by sheer misunderstanding. Side by side it reproduces dreams of Plato, metaphysical speculations of the Upanishads and ascetic doctrines of Jewish sectarians (Essenes, Therapeutae). You can find in this book reflected like in a mirror Plato's Soul of the World and his belief in the body being the prison of the "psyche," the Indian theory of an immanent divinity comprising the Universe in its bosom, and the Indian idea of the final absorption of phenomena in the Absolute, the Essenian condemnation of marriage (just think of a Jewish sacred book condemning procreation) and the Oriental belief in transmigration. Still more wonderful, this book is like an anticipation of the Prajnaparamita or Sakti doctrine of knowledge, all things resting in the bosom of Sophis (Wisdom) before creation. The Book of Wisdom is a testimony of the spirit which was alive in the eastern part of the Mediterranean in the years of 150 B.C. to 150 A.D.

To sum up our views on the mutual influence of Indian and Greek thought, we would like to take the middle course between people who deny all intimate connection between Buddhism and Christianity, between Hellenism and Hinduism and those who in recent times were ready to consider the teachings of Christ as inspired by Gautama the Buddha, or to look upon Mahayana as on a disguised Christian religion. The truth seems to be the following: 1. Some

500 years B.C. a mighty spiritual wave swept over the civilised world of those days, carrying humanity forward toward lofty ideals. They were the days of Laotze, Confucius, Buddha, the last Zoroaster and Pythagoras. They certainly appeared independently one from the other and nearly simultaneously. The roots of their respective doctrines were deeply anchored in the cultural antecedents of their countries. 2. After this powerful impulse had been given to humanity by Unknown Spiritual Forces an interlude of half a millennium followed, up to the days of Christ. There is no doubt that during this "entre-acte" the spiritual energies thus generated did not remain secluded in hermetically closed vases, but intermingled. There were no railways and no telegraph in those days, but to maintain that silk could travel from China to Phoenicia along the famous "silk road" and precious stones and aromatics from India reach Egypt, but that ideas had to remain at home like punished school boys is really too naive to be taken seriously.

With respect to Buddhism and Christianity the following seems to have happened:

During the first 500 years succeeding the death of Buddha, ideas travelled in a western direction (*Ex Oriente Lux*), following so to say the line of retreat of Alexander's army. (Asoka's missions etc.) That was the period of flow. Indian philosophy penetrates into Persia, Greece and Egypt. Traces of this peaceful invasion are easily discovered: 1. In Greek philosophy, especially in the Eleatic and Megarian schools, in Pyrrhonism, and to a certain extent in Stoicism. 2. In the Jewish ascetic sects of the Essenes, Therapeutae and even in Ebionism. 3. In the Egyptian syncretism, which gave birth first to Oriental tendencies in Jewish philosophy (Philo, Aristobules), then to Neo-Platonism and to Gnosticism. Then followed the period of ebb. This back-movement was prompted by the tremendous spiritual impetus given by Christianity. Arians, Nestorians, Manichaeans penetrate into Asia and settle down as far as China. Traces of their

influences are to be found in Mahayana in Tibetan Lamaism and perhaps in some sects of "Eastern Buddhism" (Shingon?).¹ The roots of Mahayana are however sunk into early Buddhism. All the germs are to be found in Hinayana, this beautiful Oriental plant was just watered by Western theistic ideas. Madhyamika relativism cleared the ground. There was really no breach of continuity between early and developed Buddhism. Already the edicts of king Asoka are a transition to Mahayana, in so far as they do not promise deliverance from Samsara for a good life, but well-being in a world beyond. Nirvana is never mentioned; there is rather an "avant-gout" of Amida's Western Paradise.

Asoka was a Mahayanist living one hundred years before the Pali Canon was compiled. All this is quite natural if we take the view that with the exception of a few materialistic schools (among the eighteen schools) early Buddhism was not atheistic, but rather non-theistic and its broad and deep teaching of Dharmas and Nirvana left a wide field open for the future identification of Dharmadhatu and Nirvana in a splendid, unsurpassed soaring of transcendental idealism.

Now coming back closer to our subject, we admit the difficulty of comparing the teachings of the man who revealed to humanity the sphere of the Transcendent and who gratified it with an undying, emotional, identity preserving psyche, with the teachings of Him-who-has-thus-attained, whose goal and summum bonus was Nirvana, the deliverance of the very desire to "be," who taught the voidness of self and the non-egoism of all and everything. What has to be borne in mind is that Man occupies a prominent position in Plato's philosophy Melamed in his "Buddha and Spinoza" goes so far as to say: "It is man who creates the world. . . . Plato's world is born in man's mind." Though later Buddhism might have subscribed to this theory (for instance Hiouan-Tsang), Hindu mystic thought is certainly not

¹ In all these cases the influence exercised seemed to have been more external, formal than internal.

anthropocentric. man being just a floating aggregate of elements conditioned and unconditioned and of carriers of point-moments. (Dharmas in the definition of Otto Rosenberg).

And still in spite of all this, we venture to maintain that should Śākyamuni have met Plato—though disagreeing on many points—they would have easily found a common language to speak. Like Kaçyapa, Plato certainly would have responded with a smile to the simple and graceful movement of Buddha picking a flower and holding it up. If he did not believe that every flower-petal contained innumerable Buddha-lands like particles of dust, he knew that the grace and fragrance of the flower was symbolising the only justification of Creation, Goodness and Beauty.

Sitting in the mango-grove of Anupiya or in the deer-park of Benares, or walking on the green hill of the Nymphs, they would have looked down on this ephemeral world of sorrows—dream of unknown Mind—united in the common desire to escape from it. “Be delivered from it” would suggest the Tathagata—“and merge in the realm of Nothingness.” “No” would insinuate the Academician “but regain the cherished Fatherland of bliss and harmony.” Both, anyhow would strive for salvation of humanity, because endless, incommensurable love and pity consumed their hearts and prompted their actions.

In the course of their long and passionate discussion they would have disagreed, as we have seen already, on the doctrine of Sakkhaya-ditthi,—the delusion of self, as opposed to the soul theory of Plato. The latter could not agree neither to condemn as one of the ten fetters the desire of existence in a spiritual plane (called Apuraga), because for him the goal of man is to rise to the sphere of Ideas, to become a hypostised Idea. A lively and most interesting discussion would have issued on Buddha’s prohibition of metaphysical speculations (Ditthi). Plato could not possibly sympathise with the idea, that speculation is one of the

“deadly taints,” because in his mind mental speculations alone helped us to find the general essence of things. Like Socrates he believed that moral error was mainly the outcome of bad definition. He was very Greek in this respect. Intellectual desires for him were by no means as pernicious as sensual appetites. He would certainly not have subscribed to the following sentence of the Majjhima Nikaya: “They are speculators. Some say the world is eternal, others it is not eternal and so on. . . . They were unable to escape from the Evil One.”

The “Prima Causa” would also have been a point of argument. Buddha stated that Samsara had its beginning in eternity and that it was impossible to discover a first cause. Plato maintained that the Universe was the product of thoughts of a Universal Mind. He called this Mind “Theos” and He was the Cause of all things.

Now on the question of Government the two great Teachers would also hold different views. While the Greek aristocrat dreamed of an ideal order of things in the world—the establishment of a Kingdom of Heaven on earth, where justice and wisdom reigning hand in hand would secure the temporal happiness of mankind, an ideal state ruled by Sages—the Indian Kshatriya, like Christ, considered that the Kingdom of God is in the hearts of men. As Ananda Coomaraswamy puts it: “Nothing could have been further from Buddha’s thoughts than the redress of social injustice, nor could any more inappropriate title be devised for him than that of democrat or social reformer.” Buddha’s ethics were individualistic and he was unconcerned in the external order of things. He was a psychologist more than anything else while Plato was a metaphysician and a poet.

The delicate question of love—this great agent of human activity, the very producer and prompter of life—would have found them divided. It is not easy for a Westerner to come to a clear understanding on the different shades of Indian love—kama, bhakti, maitri, karunā, bodhi-citta.

sineha, though it is obvious that kama means rather sexual love, bhakti adoration, maitri benevolence and karunā compassion. None of these expressions correspond however to the Greek "agape" or "eros." Love for Buddha is the infinite compassion for all sentient beings tied to the wheel of Sam-sara and the overwhelming desire to save them, to liberate them even at the cost of one's own perishable existence, nay, even at the price of one's own salvation and eternal Rest. Buddha's love resembles Dostoyevsky's love, which is a "love of compassion" and not a love of desire. In the Dhammapada it is expressed in the following way:

"From love cometh sorrow, from love cometh fear;
Whosoever is free from love for him there is no
sorrow...."

And there are the words of an Indian song:

"Beloved, had I known that love brings pain
I must have proclaimed with beat of drum, that
none should love."

Eros, the son of Poros (abundance) and Penia (poverty) for Plato is the stimulant of Goodness and Beauty. It is the spiritual tonic. Even individual love is a school for the desire of things unperishable. Love is the desire of possessing Beauty in eternity. Even corporeal beauty is a reflexion of the pure beauty unmixed with earthly defilements. Beauty is virtue and the man contemplating and nurturing beauty and virtue is the friend of God, he is eternal. Plato is the singer of the noble madness of love, kindled through the vision of Beauty.

Most beautiful pages have been written in Buddhist literature on love (for instance in the *Itivuttaka* where all merits are compared with stars and love alone with the moon), but this love is more a cosmic principle, than an individual sentiment. Indian love unite particulars with the macrocosm, while Greek love is the connecting link between microcosm.

It has already been pointed out somewhere that Buddha

and Plato had both misogynistic tendencies. Practically all great moral leaders were "gynophobes" to a certain extent, in so far as women for them were the symbol of unchastity or lust. This is also the common point in Buddha and Plato. Now the Exalted One is anxious moreover to put an end to the turning of the wheel of life. Plato divides men in fertile in body and fertile in mind. Both strive for immortality. The first love women with the hope of engendering children and perpetuating their name, the latter are attracted by young boys enamoured with philosophy and hope to breed in their hearts ideas of virtue and beauty.

A last word ought to be said about the method used by Buddha and Plato in their teachings. In both cases it is the dialectic method of arguments. "Gautama puts himself," says Coomaraswamy, "as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner. He attacks none of his cherished convictions. He accepts as the starting point of his own exposition the desirability of the act or condition prized by his opponent. Then he puts a higher meaning into the words. . . . and he gradually leads his opponent up to his conclusion."

Now this is quite the method employed by Plato. This is what the Greeks called the "maieutic." The teacher, acting as midwife, only assists the disciple in delivering himself of the Truth. The same Indian scholar reproaches however Buddha that in the Sutras we do not really hear both sides of the case, and Professor Oldenburg maintains that those who argue with Buddha are only to say "yes" and to be ultimately converted. This is not quite the case with Plato. He makes his disciples and opponents deliver most elaborate, sophisticated speeches, which Socrates then gradually refutes with his arguments. When Lysias talks in "Phedon" or Agathon in the "Banquet," you feel nearly convinced by their specious arguments; you just manage to refrain from pledging yourself, foretasting the decisive conclusion of Socrates.

Comparing the teachings of Buddha and Plato we have naturally to bear in mind that on many points the angle of view of the Small Vehicle is different from Mahayana Buddhism. In a way it may be said that Hinayanā's aim is Voidness and Mahayana's Light. And in this respect Platonism is nearer to Developed Buddhism, because its goal is in no way annihilation of phenomena (the resting of dharmas), but transfiguration of them until they are dissolved in the Universal Light.

We have on the other hand pointed out that there is also a notable difference between the immanence theory of early Platonism and the transcendental and unitarian philosophy of the last creations of Plato. We therefore take Buddhism and Platonism as organic "wholes," as living streams of consciousness, judging them by their fruits. A man today in his "Weltanschauung" and in his relation to Actuality is Buddhist or Platonist without knowing the difference between the Pali Canon and the texts of Nepalese Buddhism, or distinguishing between the ideology of "Phaedre" or of the "Laws." Both systems have developed into purely idealistic cosmo-conceptions, where the sensible world has just the value, the significance which corresponds to the degree of enlightenment of the observer. For the liberated bhikkhu or the purified mystic the finite vanishes equally in the infinite.

The main point and final touch of both Buddhism and Platonism seems to us to be that this empirical world is just a glamour, a spell of an Unknown and Unknowable Magician, which can, which must be conjured with the magical wand, the vajra-hammer of knowledge.

We would therefore venture to assert that there is no irreconcilable divergence between the esoteric teachings of the Upanishads, probably the forefathers of both Buddhism and Platonism—where the phenomenal world was after all only a product of Maya-illusion and where the Self, the Atman, was by no means a personal, individual ego but

ultimately identical with the True Being—and the doctrines of Buddha and Plato.

While the founder of Greek idealism invited his disciples to cast off the tainted garbs of their bodies and merge unfettered in the Realm of the Infinite Goodness and Beauty, the Merciful One taught to his followers that life was sorrow caused by ignorance and that ignorance was maintained by attachment; he strove therefore to dispel the conceit of the "I" and the "Mine," in order to liberate mankind from the bonds of the transient and sorrowful and open wide before them the gates of Eternity.

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