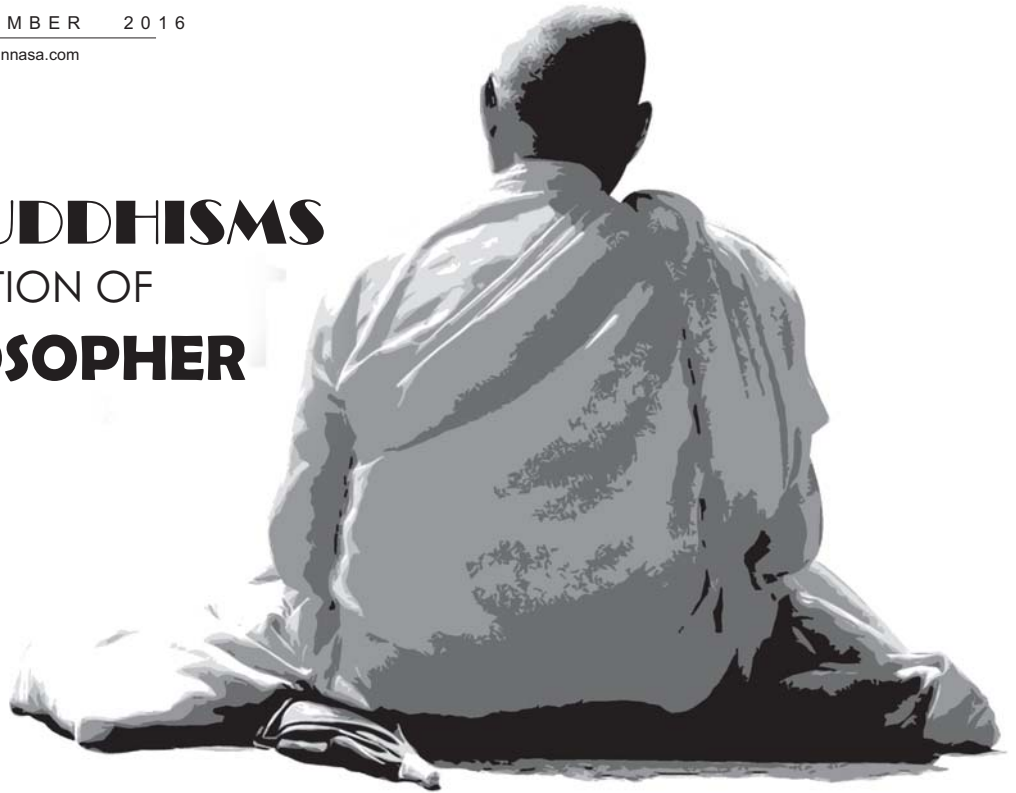




THREE BUDDHISMS AND THE ISOLATION OF THE PHILOSOPHER



There are three Buddhisms operating in the world today. I am not referring to Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. The latter are basically perceived as unopposed to each other and their followers are observed to worship together in many an instance. The reference here is to three different kinds of Buddhism often running in contradiction to each other and extending their coverage across the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana streams themselves. My three Buddhisms represent a fundamental differentiation. What are they? They are Buddhism as philosophy, Buddhism as religion and Buddhism as a tribal badge of identity.

There is much evidence to believe that the Buddha was, to begin with, a philosopher of ancient times like Socrates, Plato or Aristotle. An extraordinarily intelligent man, he was given to deep thinking and reflection about the existential condition of the human being; found it unsatisfactory and searched for a way out of the crisis. The Buddha's focus, though, was different to that of Aristotle and particularly Plato who were theory builders. If comparisons be appropriate, the Buddha was more akin to Socrates. The latter was also interested in focussing on the human being and he went round seeking to get people to clarify their assumptions about issues like life, happiness and justice. The Buddha also adopted a questioning approach similar to Socrates and he loved to talk to people. In a very real sense their feet were on the ground and not in the air of an allegedly 'transcendent reality.'

The basic teaching of the Buddha related to ethical philosophy. In his principal doctrines—the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path he tried to diagnose the personal existential crisis of mind and delineated a moral path that could lift him out of that crisis. While the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Jewish directed followers to rally round God and worship him and part to him for deliverance the Buddha gave the task of 'deliverance' to man himself. The Buddhist philosophy was sharply human-centric. "Be a light unto yourselves," Buddha advised Ananda in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta on the eve of his passing away. Man is not helpless and he need not seek the help of any divine being for his liberation. By own effort he can do it himself. This was Buddha's basic philosophical approach. It was dominantly empiri-

cal and not dependent on a transcendent entity like God.

In explaining the nature of things (res natura) the Buddha eschewed the divine and resorted to the causal theory of Paticca Samuppada (Dependent Origination). "With this arising that will arise." Every phenomena is conditional upon other phenomena. Hence, there is no phenomena that could be deemed to stand on its own—no 'uncaused cause.' The Paticca Samuppada impliedly dismisses the belief of a God creator. Professor KN Jayatilleka (Facets of Buddhist Philosophy) points out how Makkhali Gosala had come out with a creation theory and how the Buddha repudiated the latter. Thus, once creation goes off and the creator is also off, so would be the heavens. There is a controversy as to whether the concepts of Samsara, rebirth and Nirvana relate to the empirical. Some scholars say that these elements of the Buddhist doctrine are empirical given that the Buddha postulated the activity of paranormal powers as being



part of the empirical experience (dibba chakku). Others admit they were transcendental. Be that as it may, the fact is that such entities had not been accepted as an outcome of faith in a divine revelation. Therefore, the philosophical fence of the early Buddhist Dhamma cannot be disputed.

After the passing away of the Buddha, his teachings evolved into a religion. It is true the Buddha had organised the Sangha and established the Vinaya Pitaka or code of behaviour for the Sangha. But the Sangha he established was not a body of Christian-style disciples gathering around the Buddha and worshipping him as the Christians did to Jesus—"the son of God." It was more in the nature of a school for discourse with teach-

ers who would go round and explain the Buddha's teaching to those who asked for it. The Buddha admonished monks not to exercise any compulsion or conversion. The monks can only ask those interested to come and see for themselves (Ehi Passiko). The Buddhist Emperor Asoka in his Rock Edicts enjoined his people to respect other religions.

After the Buddha passed away, it were the monks themselves who institutionalised the philosophy into a religion. Partly, this was due to devotion. It may also be surmised that monks realised a sense of power that could be expanded and utilised for their upkeep and benefit. Statues came up. The statues of the Buddha are referred to as "Piliimahanse," -an appellation given typically to something divine. Worshipping came up. Elaborate rituals followed. So were the incense and the fragrance in temples. It was easy to decorate the philosophy with the flowers and the iconic images. In the process, the externalities (Aamisra Poojawa) took precedence. A whole gamut of ritual that came to be associated with an individual's critical life stages—birth, marriage and death got into being. Blessings are invoked in ordinary conversation among Buddhists. Like "Jesu Saranayi," Buddhists say "Budu Saranayi." Witness a Sinhalese marriage and you will see the references to the Buddha although the Buddha had nothing to do with marital ceremony.

A form of popular Buddhism grew up in the life of ordinary people. Part of the flow toward religion and worship came as a result of the admixture of the Buddhist teaching with local deities of the hosting societies. The point was that a philosophy as such does not offer any 'salvation' for the good or any punishment for the bad. Philosophy as a discipline is a rational exercise and an explanation of phenomena. The local gods perfectly filled that vacuum in this kind philosophical teaching. By acknowledging gods, though not a

creator-God, Buddhist teaching itself paved the pathway for such a development. Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka do house Indian-origin gods like Vishnu, Shiva, Pattini etc. The concepts of heaven and hell were introduced almost metaphorically to begin with. One may pass merit from a merit bank to those who are dead and gone. The wicked would go to hell and burn while the good will be in heaven (divyaloke). Read the Lo Weda Sangarawa. The Divyaloke was conflated with the idea of being born in a happy place. Buddha statues are all over where Buddhists are. So are the trees. Prayers are made to the Bo tree seeking special favour.

In its religious process there is a very important aspect impacting on Buddhism. This is the development of emotion to protect the religion from critics and convertors. According to evolution theory emotions play a crucial part in our self-protection. We notice an enemy advancing toward us and we develop aggression or we run away. What guides us in both such instances to take action even before our reasoning can be summoned is emotion.

While emotions have positive benefits they have serious negative sides. This is seen best when considering the third category of Buddhism and that is Buddhism as a tribal badge of identity. Buddhism is an essential part of the ethnic identity of Sri Lankans, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Burmese and Thais. The religion acquired special significance to Sinhalese people because of the Mahawamsa claim that the Buddha regarded the Sinhalese as his chosen people. This was obviously inserted by the overenthusiastic author of that great historical document—a Buddhist monk. However it is perceived as true by Sinhala Buddhists over generations.

This third category of Buddhists tend to defend everything about the religiosity of Buddhism. The reason is that that is the popular manifestation of Buddhism. They also point out that the religious vehicle is necessary to popularise the Buddhist teaching. There is some cogency in this practical argument for established Buddhism. The temple has been the epicentre behind the popularisation and widespread acceptance of Buddhism