BRAHMANISM AND BUDDHISM:
TWO ANTITHETIC CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIETY
IN ANCIENT INDIA

Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti
(Institute of Buddhist Studies Foundation, FIEB/CONICET/Argentina)

Introduction

Brahmanism and Buddhism gave rise in India to two forms of society strongly opposed.

The philosophical principles maintained by Brahmanism and Buddhism, their conceptions of man and of the destiny of man, which were the foundation of those two antithetic types of society, had to be also equally opposed.¹

Buddhism meant in face of Brahmanism a profound social change, which could be called ‘revolutionary’, if it were not that this term is generally associated with violence, violence that was completely alien to Buddhism. Let us express this in terms of Albrecht Weber, the great German Indologist (1825-1901)², in our translation from German:

“Buddhism is, in its origin, one of the most magnificent and radical reactions in favor of the universal human rights of the individual against the oppressing tyranny of the pretended privileges of divine origin, of birth, and of class.

Buddhism is the work of a single man, Buddha, who in the beginning of the 6th century B. C., in Eastern India, rose up against the Brahmanical hierarchy, and, thanks to the simplicity and ethical force of His Teaching, provoked a complete rupture of Indian people with their past.

In face of the hopeless distortions of all human feelings that the Brahmanical estate and cast-system brought with them, in face of the ardent desire of liberation not only from earthly individual existence that adopted for the great part of the people only so painful and oppressing forms, but also from the eternally changing system of reincarnations, such as was supposed by the teaching of transmigration of souls in conditions of endless suffering and torture, teaching which had gradually developed, taking the place of the more ancient, simple belief in immortality – in face of all that rose up that man with His Message about the equal right of all men, without distinction of birth, class or rank, and even of sex, and


about Liberation from the individual existence, which can be reached by all, soon or later, only by means of the correct knowledge and the correct behavior.”

The well deserved interest provoked by the greatness and deepness of Buddhist Philosophy and the lofty character of its Ethics may be the cause of generally not giving due attention to what Buddhism represents in the field of social and individual rights.

In this article we shall deal with the most important oppositions between both philosophical and religious currents of thought with special reference to the two types of society they originated in Ancient India.

**Brahmanism**

When around the year 500 before the beginning of the Common Era Buddhism arose in India, Brahmanism dominated there as a magnificent and coherent religious, ethical, philosophical and social system. Brahmanism is the continuation of Vedism, the culture brought to India by Indo-Europeans or Aryans around 1500 before the Common Era, when they invaded India and created Indian Culture. Brahmanism is in its turn the predecessor of Hinduism, which takes form three or four centuries before the Common Era. Thus we have a religious line - Vedism, Brahmanism, Hinduism – with more or less 35 centuries of existence, which presents, of course, the changes and transformations of any social phenomenon, maintaining notwithstanding a fundamental unity and identity through all of them.

**The Shruti**

Brahmanism had its supreme foundation in the *Shruti*, a word derived from the root *ŚRuti*, “to hear”, and which designates a “Sacred Knowledge orally transmitted by the Brāhmans from generation to generation”. We can translate this word by “Revelation”, since it points out to a special feature of *Shruti* to which we shall refer afterwards. *Shruti* is constituted by a series of texts: the *Vedas* (*Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda*), the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Āranyakas* and the *Upanishads*. They are believed to contain

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4 F. Tola y C. Dragonetti, “La fecha del Parinirvāṇa de Buda”, in *Revista de Estudios Budistas* (México-Buenos Aires), No. 7, Abril, 1994, pp. 89-106, where the diverse dates proposed for the *Parinirvāṇa* of the Buda are examined.


the ultimate criterion of Truth, the answer to all the questions that man can pose to himself, the solution to the enigmas of existence, as the creation of the universe and the origin of creatures, the norms that must regulate the relations among men and the organization of communities in which they group together, the description of the ceremonies and rites whereby Gods have to be worshipped in order to obtain their benevolence and protection, and whereby the Order in the Universe and in human society is maintained.

There is also the belief that the texts that constitute the Shruti have not been composed by any human, divine or transcendent being. They exist since a beginningless eternity, absolutely autonomous, not depending on anything or anybody, getting from their total independence their utmost and glorious validity. By their own power they reveal themselves to predestined men, the rishis, the sages, the seers, and poets of the Ancient India, in each new creation of the Universe in the beginningless and endless series in which alternate the universal creations and destructions.

At the beginning of Vedism-Brahmanism-Hinduism (as well as in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic Traditions) there is a Text, a Book, of a mysterious nature, which fixes the limits of human knowledge, and restrains it within its boundaries. The respect to that Text, the adhesion to it, and the submission to its authority determined one’s own belonging to Brahmanism.

The texts that constitute the Rig Veda were compiled and organized in the form in which we actually know them probably around 600 before the Common Era, having existed in an independent form since several centuries before that date. In that epoch the other three Vedas might have also been compiled and organized. As regards the Brāhmaṇas and the Upanishads, they were compiled or composed in the next centuries.

The text of the Rig Veda, since the very moment of its compilation, was carefully preserved in order to avoid any change or alteration in it. The other texts of the Shruti were also preserved although not in the same degree the Rig Veda was.

**Brahman**

Brahmanism is centered on a metaphysical construction of grandiose projections, product of the beliefs, speculations, reasoning of many generations of thinkers. Brahman is the Absolute, the Truth of the Truth, the Being, Unique and without a second, the

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Substance of privileged status, which exists in se et per se, as the ens realissimum, as the deepest fundamento of reality, beyond reason and word, and which can be reached during an extra-ordinary Yogic experience, i.e. in the course of a mystical trance. It is an abstract neutral concept, devoid of any connotation, characteristic or quality.

The Brahmanical thinkers strove to free Brahman from any thing that could in some way connect It with the empirical reality or with any creation of human mind, in order to make It “the Other”, in the greatest extension and profundity of this term.

At the same time, they acknowledged that to designate It we can only rely upon our empirical language, which distorts what it expresses and is insufficient to describe what is beyond the reach of the senses; in order to attain It, we can only resort to the means that our weak and frail human condition offers us.

Atman

Brahmanism postulated also the existence of the Atman,\textsuperscript{11} the spirit, the soul, the individual consciousness in all its authentic purity, the true “I”, the true man, identical with Brahman in essence, attributes and mystery. A famous Upanishadical formulation expresses that identity: tat tvam asi, “You are That”.

Substantialism and unity

Because of its notions of Brahman and Atman, Brahmanism is a substantial and unitary system of thought.\textsuperscript{12} Under the always changing and impermanent reality that our senses reveal to us; under the phenomenism in which that reality fades away; under the complex weft of causes and effects which human analysis faces; under the plurality and the multiplicity in which man is immerse, there exists –for Brahmanism- an inalterable, unique and one Substance, origin, support and end of all.

Becoming Brahman

The Vedic Epoch was vital, vigorous and youthful.\textsuperscript{13} Man hoped to live one hundred years, surrounded by his progeny, in possession of abundant material wealth that his Gods generously granted him when he knew how to please them with his prayers and offerings. After death, the Vedic Indian longed for reaching the World of Yama, the Ruler of the Kingdom of the Dead. This world was a splendid paradise where man recovered his body in good health and without wounds, with which he could enjoy the pleasures he had

\textsuperscript{11} Oltramare, op. cit., pp.75-88.


enjoyed or wished to enjoy in his worldly live: abundant food, intoxicating beverages, hunting, gamble, women, without unjust masters, in an inconceivable atmosphere of equality.

With Brahmanism this conception of existence changed. The belief in reincarnations arose and installed for ever in the Brahmanic system as an essential element, becoming a *cultural dogma* of India. A pessimist feeling took possession of Brahmanism. Human existence – it was thought – passes under the sign of suffering; this suffering is reiterated in the successive, countless reexistences through which man has to go over. The kind of each existence is conditioned by the merits or demerits accumulated in previous lives. It is the doctrine of *karman* – another cultural dogma of India- which attributes to actions an own and autonomous power to produce in this life or in the future lives good or bad effects according to the moral character this actions possess. The law of *karman* yields thus the function of the moral retribution of actions. Man does not aspire anymore to be reborn in a paradise, because he thinks that the existence in it will be only a mere stage in the infinite succession of rebirths, and that the paradisiacal pleasures may be followed by another reincarnation in an inferior form of life or in painful circumstances. Now man aspire to liberation from the cycle of reincarnations and to be absorbed in *Brahman*, identifying himself with *Brahman*, recovering the unity between *Brahman* and the individual soul, *Ātman*, which has always been there but unknown and forgotten, *becoming Brahman* – as a flame of fire that disappears in another.

**The Gods**

Brahmanism with its new conception of existence, contrary in many aspects to that of Vedism, with its exaltation of a new principle, *Brahman*, to the hierarchically highest rank, did not discard the Gods it had inherited from Vedism, either the great Gods or the minor Deities. The Gods were integrated in the new cultural system of Brahmanism and remained being important elements of the cult, although Brahmanism limited in manifold ways their status, set a bound to their functions, and diminished their divine power. In the Vedic Epoch Gods could bestow what man wanted and asked for: long life, descendants, richness, and even a propitious although transitory *post-mortem* destiny; now, in the Brahmanic Epoch, they continued granting these favors to their devotees, but Liberation from reincarnations and identification with *Brahman*, which had become the highest aspirations, could not be obtained by divine Grace; they could only be obtained submitting oneself to a strict intellectual and moral discipline that depended only from one’s own effort, remaining very far from the reach of the common people. But that aim and the method to reach it was not even open for everybody. It could be said that the lofty ideal of


Brahmanism was the privilege reserved for the few persons who could comply with the severe requirements it demanded and possessed a privileged status in society.

The devaluation of the old Gods in the Brahmanic Period was inevitable, but anyhow with the course of time and the evolution of Brahmanism into Hinduism new Gods were added to the old ones and some Gods acquired a great religious preeminence, were even identified with *Brahman*, and believed to be *Brahman* empirical manifestation. The devaluation process that has taken place in the case of the Vedic Gods was quite different from that which occurred in the West with the advent of Christianity: there the Gods of the previous Greek and Roman Cultures were completely put aside, their cult was prohibited, and even those persons, which persisted in worshipping them, were severely punished.

*The rite*

There was another circumstance which weakened the power of the Gods. In Vedism, by means of the gratification of the offerings and the flattering of the prayers involved in the rite, man could gain the goodwill of the Gods, could incline them to concede what he was asking for. Gods were those who granted the favors for which they were invoked; the rite was a simple means to ingratiate oneself with them and to awake their generosity.

But the *brāhmans*, the “priests”, the experts in the rite, which constituted the highest caste into which the Indian society was already divided, had reflected on the essence of the rite, and, at the same time as they established the rigorous and unavoidable norms to which each rite had to be subordinated, they have also inquired into the limits and the sources of its power. Strengthening a belief of magical inspiration, they reached the conclusion that the efficacy of the rite, if it is performed rigorously observing the rule, to which it must be submitted, does not depend on anything or anybody. This efficacy has its origin in the rite itself; it does not derive from any will alien to it. The Gods became thus relegated to an inferior position, lowered to the same level as the ritual implements and formulas, transformed into simple elements of the rite that acted by itself and by itself obtained the result for which the rite had been created, and for which it had been put in motion by the priests, the experts in the ritual action.16

Moreover the rite thus conceived had in Brahmanism a remarkable presence under the multiple forms it assumed: public rites, as that which accompanied the consecration of a king; private rites as that of marriage.17 The very life of the Indian people was a succession of rites that initiated even before birth (rites of conception) and continued even after death

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(funerary and post-mortem rites). Indian Culture became thus a ritualistic culture.

And being these rites—as we have already said—carried on by persons “specialized” in ritual, the brāhmans, this fact contributed to a great extent to increase the power of the Brahmin caste.

**Brahmanic society**

The achievements of Brahmanism were remarkable in the metaphysical, literary and religious levels, but its ‘masterpiece’ was the society it constructed. We shall refer to what it represented as an intellectual construction and as a social creation. It was a monolithic society, with its elements strongly linked, indissolubly connected among them, enclosed within itself inside impassable limits. It was a hierarchical society, a society of privileges and of discrimination, a society of group ethics. It produced injustices, provoked immense suffering, and inhuman humiliations, and frequently it resorted to violence to impose its norms. It hindered also the social mobility and the evolution of ideas, among these last ones, especially those of scientific nature. Let us remark that something similar to what happened in India took place also in European Middle Age where Christian Church dominated over general consciousness and hindered the change of ideas, in first place those related to science.

Anyway this stratified society in India lasted for more than 25 centuries and conferred to India not only these sinister aspects but also a cohesion that allowed this culture to resist the rush of violent invasions and conquests without losing its identity, and gave rise to remarkable literary works and philosophical systems. We shall only refer briefly here to the principal characteristics of that society.

Before that let us make a digression concerning European society in its Middle Age, when Christian religion attained the utmost extent of its power, quoting a passage from Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, London: Edward Arnold (Publishers), 1977, pp. 8-9, which specially refers to French society at that time, but it can be applied to the entire European society then. Europe also had, during the Middle Age, an unjust social structure with its original division in members of the Church, warrior feudal aristocracy, and laboring and starving peasants, to which were afterwards added the merchants. This social structure provoked also injustice and suffering as well as in India:

> “The [social] system, like its [Carolingian] prototype, rested upon the idea of peace, relying on an ultra-conservative concept of social stratification, confirming and foreshadowing the order of relationships in the celestial Jerusalem. It proposed a triangular organization with three orders – three stable, strictly defined, social categories, each invested with a particular function. In the first rank were the men of prayer, united to form the church; this, in its reforming zeal, tried to distinguish itself ever more clearly from the laity by invoking the superiority of the spiritual over the temporal power, and sought a closer cohesion by offering clerks the monastic code. The order next in rank consisted of the warriors whose

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duty it was to defend all the people, and whose mission, like that of the clergy, justified their right to be supported by the labour of others. Last of all, in total subjection, came the peasants, burdened with endless toil because they were charged with the duty of feeding the other two orders of humanity."

“To their way of thinking [i.e. to the way of thinking of the members of that society] … each of the three orders of society had to play its part in maintaining the status quo in a world which was ordered by divine dispensation and was consequently unalterable.”

“[With the course of time] to satisfy new demands, groups of specialists, masons, vinedressers, craftsmen and merchants, emerged from the mass of peasants …”

Two important features of the social system of India, the system of castes, to which we shall refer afterwards: the submission to the religious notion of purity/impurity and the implacable enchainment to the caste in which one is born, were absent from the European medieval society. This fact - among others and in the course of time – allowed a healthy social mobility that contributed to disorganize the established social classes, which involved so much injustice and inequity, avoiding thus their perpetuation.

The castes

Brahmanical society is rigidly divided in castes, hierarchically organized.19 Theoretically they are four, which we enumerate beginning with the highest in the social hierarchy: 1. caste of the brāhmans (improperly called priests); 2. caste of the ksātriyas (warriors and rulers); 3. caste of the vaiśyas (merchants, farmers, herders, artisans, bankers), and 4. caste of the shūdras, the servants.

One does not belong to a caste either by his own will or by the election of others; one belongs to a determinate caste only by birth, i.e. having been born from a father and a mother belonging to that caste. There is not social mobility from one caste to the other: until death one belongs to the caste in which one is born, unless by an action considered against the caste structure and the injunctions attached to it one is excluded from his caste.

The three first castes were considered pure and the fourth impure. “Purity” and “impurity” were essential concepts in the Brahmanical society; they had nothing to do with moral values, but they were tightly integrated within religion. Persons were considered essentially pure or impure according to their birth in a pure or impure caste. For maintaining purity a person belonging to a pure caste must avoid performing activities corresponding to an impure caste or even having physical contact with a member of an

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impure caste.

Two fundamental norms concerning castes: The members of a caste must eat and get married only with members of their same caste. These are the norms of *commensality* and *connubiality*, destined to maintain the castes enclosed in themselves and to avoid thus the fearful “mixture or confusion of castes” (*varṇasāṇkara*), which carries with itself the *impurity* and the destruction of the families, as *Bhagavad-Gītā* affirms.\(^\text{20}\)

*Nāradasṃrti* XII, stanza 117, commands that the king, i.e. the State, is in general responsible for the vigilance of people in order to avoid this mixture of castes, and especially for warding and protecting women from that mixture of castes:\(^\text{21}\)

\[
\text{rājñā pariṣṭyaṃ na yathā jāyate varṇasāṃkaraḥ} / \\
tasmād rājñā viśeṣeṇa striyo rakṣyā tu saṃkarāt} //
\]

“The king must watch that mixture of castes be not produced, therefore women must be especially protected from mixture.”

Anyhow there were not absent in Indian society the cases of men and women that incurred in illicit unions with members of other castes -inferior or superior- to which they did not belong. The children born from them passed to integrate some of the innumerable *subcastes*, which in the course of time and because of that process, were gradually being created. These subcastes or mixed castes received a special name and were located in some place more or less honorable of the classification of the castes.

Thus the original fourfold division cedes the place to a complicate system of castes and mixed castes,\(^\text{22}\) which competed for their hierarchical preeminence in the system.

**Occupations and qualities**

Brahmanism fixed for the members of each caste the occupations which they had to carry out and the qualities they had to possess and cultivate in themselves.

The *Manusmṛti* or the *Laws of Manu*, one of the legal texts with the greatest authority in Brahmanism, points out the occupations of *brāhmans*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaisāyas* and


adhyāpanam adhyāyanam yajanaṃ yājanaṃ tathā /
dānaṃ pratigrahaḥ ca va brāhmaṇānām akalpayat //88//

prajānāṃ rākṣaṇāṃ dānam ijjā’dhīyāyanam eva ca /
viṣayeśvaprasaktiś ca kṣatryasya samādiśat //89//

paśūnāṃ rākṣaṇāṃ dānam ijjā’dhīyāyanam eva ca /
vaṅkpatham kusīḍaḥ ca vaisyasya krṣim eva ca //90//

ekam eva tu śūdrasya prabhuḥ karmma samādiśat /
eteśām eva varṇānām śūrūśām anāśyayā //91//

“He [the Creator] assigned to the brāhmans teaching and studying (the Śruti),
sacrificing for themselves and sacrificing for others,
giving and accepting donations. //88//

Commanded the kṣatryas to protect people,
to make donations,
to make offerings to the Gods or Manes,
to study (the Śruti),
and to abstain from attaching to sensual enjoyments. //89//

And the vaiśyas, to tend cattle,
to make donations,
to make offerings to the Gods or Manes,
to study (the Śruti),
to trade, to lend money, and agriculture. //90//

But to the śūdras, one sole occupation prescribed the Lord:
the humbly service to members of the other three castes. //91//”

The Baudhāyanadharmaśūtra I, 10, 2-5, The Kashī Sanskrit Series No. 104 ed.,
expresses itself in similar terms to the Manusmytī adding an interesting remark concerning
the origin of the preeminence of the brāhmans. It was Brahman Itself who gave them their
privilege and established the system of castes. The text of śūtras I, 10, 2-5 runs as follows:

brahma vai svam mahimānaṃ brāhmaṇeśvadadhād adhyayanādyāpanayajanayājana-
dānapratigrahasaṃyuktaṃ vedānāṃ guptyai. //2//

kṣatre balaṃ adhyayanayajanadānaśastrakośabhūtarakṣanasaṃyuktaṃ kṣatrasya vṛ-
dhyai. //3//
śūdraṣu pūrveṣaṁ paricaryā. //5//

“Brahman indeed placed Its own greatness in brāhmanas, together with [the duties and privileges of] studying [and] teaching [the Shruti], sacrificing for themselves [and] sacrificing for others, giving and accepting donations, for the preservation of the Vedas. //2//

In the kṣatriyas [It placed] power, together with [the duties and privileges of] studying [the Shruti], sacrificing for themselves, giving donations, weapons, riches, the protection of beings, for the augmentation of [their] power. //3//

In the vaiṣyas [It placed] [working, vārttā] together with studying [the Shruti], sacrificing for themselves, giving donations, agriculture, trading, tending cattle, for the augmentation of the performing of religious offerings. //4//

In the sūdras [It only placed] the state of being a servant of [the members of] the previous [three castes]. //5//

In Bhagavad Gītā (XVIII, 42-44) are mentioned the qualities and virtues proper of the members of each caste, what constitutes the basis of the doctrine of the svadharma or “one’s own duty”, to which we shall refer afterwards:

śāmo danas tapah saucam kṣāntir ārjavam eva ca /
 jñānam vijñānam āstikyam brahmakarma svabhāvajam //42//

śauryam tejo dhṛtir dāksyaṁ yuddhe cā py apalāyanaṁ /
 dānam īśvarabhāvaś ca kṣātrakarma svabhāvajam //43//

kṛṣigauraksyavānijam vaiśyakarma svabhāvajam /
 paricaryātmakaṁ karma śūdraśyā'pi svabhāvajam //44//

“Calm, self-control, austerity, purity,
patience, rectitude, theoretical knowledge and worldly knowledge, orthodoxy
is the karman of the brāhman, born from his own nature. //42//

Heroism, energy, firmness, skill, and also not running away in battle,
generosity and lordliness,
is the karman of the warrior, born from its own nature. //43//

Agriculture, cattle-tending and commerce,
is the karman of the vaiśya, born from its own nature.
Karman constituted by service
is proper of the śūdra, born from its own nature. //44//
In the context of this passage of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* the word *karman* not only designates the activity and qualities that correspond to the members of each caste, but also the inexorable destiny that is imposed on them by the actions performed by them in their previous existences – it is the Indian doctrine of *samsāra/karman*. If this destiny revealed by birth is not complied with, then the consequence will be a next birth in worse conditions.

**One’s own duty (svadharma)**

The distribution of the members of society into closed castes and the assignation to each of these castes of well fixed activities and virtues – what is clear from the quoted text of *Bhagavad Gītā* in the previous section - originated the concept of *svadharma*, one’s own duty. Each caste has its own ethics: the *brāhman*, an ethics in which knowledge prevailed; the *ksatriya*, an ethics in which courage prevailed; the *vaiśya*, an ethics in which gain profit prevailed; the *śūdra*, an ethics in which humbleness and will of serving others prevailed. And each one had to accomplish his/her own duty and abide by it, because, as the *Bhagavad Gītā* III, 35 a-b, says:

\[
\text{śreyān svadharma viguṇah paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt} / \\
\text{“[Although] imperfect, one’s own duty is better} \\
\text{than another’s duty well performed”.}^{23}
\]

The performance or non-performance of one’s own duty produces meritorious or harmful effects in this life or in the future reincarnations. In this life the harmful effects are the punishments that legal treatises (*dharmaśūtras*, *dharmaśāstras*, *dharmaṃśrtis*) fix for the transgression of the Law (*Dharma*), among which it is the exclusion from the caste, what makes of the transgressor an “outcast”, outside the social system and the family. In the future lives the harmful effects are the distressing destinies in the cycle of reincarnations.

**One’s own duty, the Buddha and Kumārila**

The idea of “one’s own duty” (*svadharma*), as that of the doctrine of castes in general, had in India a strong power of survival. This is shown by an interesting passage of Kumārila (*7th* century of the Common Era), an important thinker of the Mīmāṃsā, an orthodox school of Brahmanism and Hinduism, in his Treatise *Tantravārttika*, p. 329, which is a commentary on Śabara’s *Bhāṣya* on the *Pūrva-māṃsāsūtras* of Jaimini.\(^{24}\) Kumārila, on dealing with the *Śmrītis* that present doctrines in contradiction with those of

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\(^{23}\) When the great hero Arjuna, in the last battle of the *Mahābhārata*, loses heart since he has to destroy his relatives and friends who are in the opposed lines, God Kṛṣṇa reminds him that he has to carry out that destruction, because that is his unavoidable duty as a warrior.

the *Shruti* whose authoritativeness is beyond any question or doubt in Brahmanic society, mentions the *Śākyavacana* or *Bauddha teachings* (the “Smṛtis” of the Baudhās), and affirms that one cannot trust such a doctrine conceived by one who has transgressed the duties of his own class in taking upon himself the function of *teaching* and the prerogative of *receiving presents* - both actions being the monopoly of the *brāhmans’* class. The text runs as follows:

svadharmātikramaṇaḥ ca yena kṣatriyeṇa satā pravakṛtvapratigrahau pratipannau sa dharmam aviplutam upadeśyatīti kaḥ samāśvāsaḥ /…

buddhādeḥ punar ayam eva vyatikramo ’laṅkārabuddhau sthitaḥ, yenaivam āha -

kalikaluṣaṅkrāṇi yāni loke /
mayi nipatantu vimucyatān tu lokaḥ, iti /

sa kila lokahitāṛthaṃ kṣatriyadharmam atikramya brāhmaṇavṛttāṃ pravakṛtvam pratipadya, pratishēṭhārikramāsamārthair brāhmaṇair ananuṣīṣṭāṃ dharmaṇām bāhyajanān anuśāsaddharmapiḍām apyātmano ’ṅgikṛtya parāṇugrahāṃ kṛtavān ity evaṃvidhāir eva guṇaiḥ stūyate … /

“‘That man who, being a kṣatriya, transgressing his own duty, has assumed the function of a teacher and the right of accepting gifts, will teach the true Dharma’ — What confidence could be placed in him? …

Moreover such transgression of the Buddha and others is mentioned in the *Ālaṅkārabuddhi* according to which He says:

‘May the consequences of the sins of the Kali Age, which were committed in this world, fall on Me, but may people be liberated.’

He [= the Buddha] is praised because of such qualities as these: ‘For the sake of the welfare of the world, transgressing his duty as a kṣatriya, assuming the function of a teacher fixed for the brāhmaṇs, taught the outcasts a Dharma not taught by the brāhmaṇs unable to transgress the prohibitions [to do such a thing: to teach to the members of the impure castes]; he favoured others, incurring in the violation even of his own Dharma’. ”

Thus, more than ten centuries after the Buddha had preached His Doctrine, Kumārila criticizes Him for having transgressing his own duty as a kṣatriya and for having performed activities of teaching and receiving donations that correspond to the brāhmaṇs.

**Hierarchized society**

The Brahmanical society was, as a consequence of its system of castes, a
hierarchized society. Each one of its members is located in the social scale in a determinate place, which he/she cannot ever abandon. According to the system, he/she was inferior to the members who occupied higher levels, and superior to those who occupied lower levels. In the Brahmanic society everyone had somebody superior to him, everyone except the brahmans. Above the brahman nobody was. The location in any determinate place of the social hierarchy gave rights and privileges, and at the same time of course imposed duties and limitations concerning the behavior and the social relations. The conduct of each member in face of members superior or inferior to him/her should be according to the hierarchical relation that existed between them. Moreover, as the superior member had the feeling of his/her own superiority, so the inferior one had the same feeling of his/her own inferiority. Thus, thanks to this internalization of the social system, it functioned with remarkable effectiveness, without the necessity of any external coercion.

Preeminence of the brahman / degradation of the śūdra

All the complex structure of the caste system is constructed upon a lonely stanza (12) of the Rīg Veda X, 90, which describes the sacrifice of the Puruṣa (a primeval giant), whose body was divided by the Gods in order to create the world:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{brahmāno 'ṣya mukham āsid bāhū rājanyah kṛtaḥ} / \\
\text{urū tad asya yad vaisīyaḥ padbhyaṁ śūdro ajāyata} /12//
\end{align*}
\]

“His mouth was the brahman,  
His two arms were made the warriors,  
His two thighs, that which was the vaisya,  
from His two feet was born the śūdra.”

It is the only reference to the castes which the Vedas contain. The brahmans on these few words speculated (Manusmṛti I, 92):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{urdhvaṁ nābher medhyataraṁ puruṣah parikirtitaḥ} / \\
\text{tasmān medhyatamaṁ tvasya mukham uktāṁ svayamabhuvā} /92//
\end{align*}
\]

“By the Supreme Being man is proclaimed to be purer above the navel;  
and therefore the mouth has been said to be the purest part of him.”

Because of having been born from the purest part of the primeval Puruṣa, the brahmans were the purest living beings and hierarchically above all the other beings. Cf. Manusmṛti, I, 93, quoted below.

The notions of purity and impurity had great importance in Hindu Culture. Sources of impurity were, for instance, the contact with beings considered impure by nature as an individual belonging to the caste of the śūdras; the participation in some events, as a funeral;

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several physiological processes as to give birth to a child or menstruation, etc. In such cases it was necessary to have recourse to determinate rites in order to eliminate the acquired impurity and to recover the pristine purity. The *brahmanas* were the experts and agents of the purificatory rites. Because of the importance of the notions of purity and impurity and of the unavoidable necessity to regain the lost purity through a rite that only the *brahmanas* could perform, they were considered as belonging to the utmost level of society.

Moreover, as we said, Brahmanism was a ritualistic culture, where the regular performance of rites in all the stages and moments of life was an obligation imposed in all the members of society. And the *brahmanas* were the persons in charge for the execution of the rites. This fact constituted another motivation for the high position they had in society.

All along Indian Culture the superiority of the *brahmanas* is extolled; to the *brahmanas* is given a status to which no other being can aspire. *Vishnusmrti* XIX, 20-23, emphatically says:

\[
\text{devaḥ parokṣadevāḥ prayakṣadevāḥ brahmaṇaḥ} \quad /20//
\]
\[
\text{brahmaṇair lokā dhārayante} \quad /21//
\]
\[
\text{brahmaṇānām prasādena divi tiṣṭhanti devatāḥ} / \\
\text{brahmaṇābhitiṣṭāṃ vākyanāṃ na mithyā jāyate kvacit} \quad /22//
\]
\[
\text{yad brahmaṇās tuṣṭatamā vādanti} \\
\text{tad devatāḥ prayabhinandayanti} / \\
\text{tuṣṭeṣu tuṣṭāḥ satataṁ bhavanti} \\
\text{prayakṣadeveṣu parokṣadevāḥ} \quad /23//
\]

“The Gods are invisible deities, the *brahmanas*, visible deities. //20//

The worlds are sustained by the *brahmanas*. //21//

The Gods reside in heaven by the grace of the *brahmanas*;

a speech uttered by the *brahmanas* is never false. //22//

What the *brahmanas* say being highly pleased,

that the Gods approve in return;

when the visible Gods are pleased,

the invisible Gods are always pleased. //23//”

---


15
Similar eulogies are found in Manusmṛti I, 93, 95, 96, 98, 99,100:

\[
\text{uttamāṅgodbhavā jvaiṣṭhyād brāhmaṇaś caiva dhāraṇāt / sarvasyaivaśya sargasya dharmaṁ brāhmaṇaḥ prabhuh } /93//
\]

\[
yasyāṣyena sadāśnanti havyāni tridīvaukasaḥ / kavyāṇi caiva pitaraḥ kīṁ bhūtam adhikāṇaṁ tataḥ } /95//
\]

\[
bhūtānāṁ prāṇināṁ śreṣṭhāḥ prāṇināṁ buddhiṁvinaḥ / buddhīmatuḥ naraḥ śreṣṭhāḥ nareṣu brāhmaṇaḥ smṛṭaḥ } /96//
\]

\[
upattīr eva viprasya mūrtir dharmasya śaśvatī / sa hi dharmārtham utpanno brahmabhūyāya kalpate } /98//
\]

\[
brāhmaṇo jāyamāno hi prthivyāṁ adhiṇāya / īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānaṁ dharmakośasya guptaye } /99//
\]

\[
sarvaṁ svam brāhmaṇasyedam yat kiṁcij jagatīgatam śraisthyenabhijanenedam sarvaṁ vai brāhmaṇo 'rhati } /100//
\]

“Because of having been born from the highest part of [Brahman’s] body, because of his primogeniture, and because [he was born for] maintaining the Sacred Word, the brāhman is according to Law the Lord of the whole creation. //93//

¿Which being could be above him, through whose mouth the Gods eat always the sacrificial oblation and the deceased Ancestors, the oblations of food for the dead?\(^{27}\) //95//

Of the existent things the most excellent are the animated beings; of the animated beings, those who subsist by intelligence; of the intelligent, men are the most excellent; among men, are said to be by Tradition, the brāhman. //96//

The very birth of a brāhman is an eternal incarnation of the Sacred Law\(^{28}\)

for he is born for the benefit of the Dharma, he is fit for becoming Brahman. //98//

---

\(^{27}\) What the brāhmans eat in the sacrifices reaches through them the Gods and the ancestors.

\(^{28}\) The Dharma is the whole of the laws which govern human conduct in all its aspects and the function of the Universe.
A brāhman coming into existence
is on earth superior by birth,
the Lord of all beings,
for the protection of that treasure which is the Sacred Law. //99//

Whatever exists in the world, that is the property of the brāhman,
on account of his superiority, on account of his birth,
the brāhman has a right to all this. //100//

As is seen by the previous quotations the Smṛti texts are full of praises to the brāhman – as it had to be, if it is taken into account that these legal treatises, which regulated to its extreme detail the whole system of the castes, were composed by brāhmans.

According to the functions that corresponded to brāhmans in Indian society, as a result of its historical evolution since the Indo-European invasion of India, and as a result also of the norms that were incorporated in the legal codes and treatises (Dharmasūtras, Dharmaśāstras), the brāhmans became the intellectual élite of India. They were the experts not only in questions related to the rites and the Sacred Lore in general, but also the experts in thinking and in language. The great majority of the Indian thinkers and literary authors belonged to the brāhmanic caste. It could be said that this peculiar position of brāhmans in India has some similarity with the position of the Christian priests in Europe during the Middle Age: they monopolized the intellectual activities. It could be said that perhaps the range of the brāhmanical achievements was broader than that of their fellows in Europe, and decidedly their influence lasted for many centuries more.

Their study of the rites, their analysis of their structure, the discovery of their secret and mysterious meanings, to which they added later on their researches on language, logic, philosophy, psychological processes contributed to their intellectual development, characterized by subtlety, power of abstraction and an extraordinary capacity of linguistic expression.

To brāhmans were granted numerous privileges and rights derived from their superior hierarchical position in society in manifold and important aspects of human activity. P.V. Kane, op.cit. in note 20 (II, 1, pp. 138-154), and A.A. Macdonell and A.B. Keith, Vedic Index of Names and Subjects, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967, Vol. II, pp. 80-83, enumerate the principal privileges of the brāhmans.

The śūdras, many of which were the descendants of the original inhabitants of India conquered by the Indo-Europeans occupied the extreme opposed to that of the brāhmans in the Indian castes’ system. They were considered the dregs of society. We quote a few well known texts that are sufficient to make clear the degradation to which the śūdras were submitted in Hindu society. The legal or de facto position of the śūdras had much in common with that of African slaves in United States of America, or that of the Indian aborigines in Central and South America after their conquest by the Spaniards.

We quote some texts that reveal the degradation imposed by society to the members of the śūdra caste.
In the *Mahābhārata*, in the *Rājadharmanarvan* of the *Śāntiparvan*, Chapter XII, 60 (pp. 278-285 of the Critical Edition of the *Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*), is dedicated to a description of the *sūdra* inferior and humiliating condition. We transliterate and translate the verses concerning the *sūdras*:

śūdrasyāpi hi yo dharmas tam te vakyāmi bhārata /
prajāpatir hi varṇānāṁ dāsaṁ śūdram akalpayat //27//

tasmāc chūdrasya varṇānāṁ paricaryā vidhiyate /
teṣāṁ śusṛuṣaṇāc caiva mahat sukham avāptuyat //28//

śūdra etāṁ paricaret trīṇ varṇān anasūyakaḥ /
śançayāṁś ca na kurvita jātu śūdraḥ kataṁcana //29//

pāpyān hi dhanaṁ labdhvā vaśe kuryād garīyasaḥ /
rājñāḥ vā samanuṭāntāḥ kāmaṁ kurvita dhārmikāḥ //30//

tasya vr̥ttiṁ pravakṣyāmi yac ca tasyopajīvanam /
avasyabharaṇīyo hi varṇānāṁ śūdra ucyate //31//

chatram veṣṭanam ausīram upānad vyajanāṇi ca /
yātayāmāṁ deyāṁi śūdrāya pariśraṁ //32//

adhāṛayāṁ viśiṁnāṁ vasanāṁ dvijāṭibhiḥ /
śūdrāyaiva vidheyāṁi tasya dharmadhanam hi tat //33//

yaś ca kaścid dvijāṭiṁ śūdraḥ śusṛṣūr āvrajet /
kalpyāṁ tasya tu tenāhur vr̥ttiṁ dharmavido janāḥ /
deyāḥ pīndo 'napetāya bhartavyau vrddhatubhalaḥ //34//

śudreṇa ca na hātvayo bhartā kasyāṇcida ṕapadi /
atirekeṇa bhartavyo bhartā dravyaparīṣaye /
na hi svam asti śūdrasya bhartṛhāryadhano hy asau //35//

“O Bhārata, I will tell you the *Dharma* which is proper to the *sūdra*, for Prajāpati made the *sūdra* the slave of the [three upper] castes. //27//

Therefore the service of the [three upper] castes is allotted to the *sūdras*, and by obedience he may obtain great happiness. //28//

The *sūdra* without any ill will has to serve these three castes, and the *sūdra* never has to accumulate riches in any way, //29//
because the more vile getting riches, would subdue the more important, or a correct one [with riches] receiving an order [even] from the king, would act according to his [own] will. //30//

I shall tell the maintenance of the śūdra and his livelihood, since it is said that the śūdra is necessarily maintained by the [other] castes. //31//

Used parasols, turbans, beds, sandals, and fans, have to be given to the śūdra when in service; //32//

unfit, wasted clothes, by the twice-borns have to be bestowed on the śūdra. that is the wealth, according to the Dharma, of the śūdra. //33//

Persons who know the Dharma have said:
By that śūdra whatsoever, who, eager to serve the twice-borns, approaches [one of them] - by him the maintenance of the [elected] twice-born must be procured; food has to be given [by that śūdra] to his childless [master]; both the old and the sick [masters] have to be nourished [by that śūdra]. //34//

And by the śūdra the master must not be abandoned in any adversity, the master has to be plentifully maintained in case of loss of his wealth, since the śūdra has nothing belonging to himself, because he is a person whose possessions may be taken by his master. //35//

The texts already quoted of Manusmṛti, Baudhāyanadharmaśūtras, Bhagavad-Gītā, in the section Occupations and qualities, declare that the destiny of a śūdra is to serve; the text of the Mahābhārata just quoted adds some peculiar conditions that make the śūdra a man condemned to poverty, a have-not, a slave. The śūdras were not only excluded from any benefit or happiness in this world but were also, in a general way, impeded to have access to the religious means necessary for attaining Liberation: the learning of the sacred texts and the performance of religious

29 I.e. the śūdra.

30 I.e. the members of the other three castes.

31 According to Manusmṛti VIII, 416, the śūdra as well as the wife and the son have no possession of their own, and if they have any property, it in fact belongs to the master, the husband or the father respectively; and VIII, 417, states the same principle as the Mahābhārata, that whatever the śūdra possesses may be taken by his master (bhārtrihṛtyadhanā). A similar norm is found in the Roman Right, according to which whatever was acquired by the slave became property of the master: quodcumque per seruum adquiritur, id domino adquiritur (Gaius, Institutes, I, 52).
ceremonies.

The Vaśiṣṭasṛṣṭi, Ānandāśrama edition, 1929, 18, §§ 9-13 and § 16, pp. 216-217, states:

> eke vai tac chmaśānaṃ ye śūdras tasmāc chūdrasamīpe nādhetyavyam /9/ athāpi yamagītāṇi ślokān udāharanti /10//

> śmaśānam etat pratyakṣaṃ Ye śūdṛa pāpacārṇaḥ /
tasmāc chūdrasamīpe tu nādhetyavyaṃ kadaśaṇa /A1//

> na śūdrāya maṭiṃ dadyān nocchiṣṭaṃ na haviśkṛtām /
na cāsyopadiśed dharmāṇa cāsyata vratam ādiśet /A2//

> yaś cāsyopadiśed dharmāṇa yaś casya vratam ādiśet /
so ‘śamṛṭaṃ tamo ghoraṃ saha tena prapadyate, iti /A3//

… kṛṣṇavarpa yā rāmā ramapayaiva na dharmāya na dharmayeti /A6//

“Some say that the śūdras are a burial ground, for this reason in the proximity of a śūdra [the Veda] must not be recited. //9// Moreover they cite as an instance ślokas chanted by Yama: // 10//

The wicked śūdras manifestly are a burial ground, therefore never [the Veda] has to be recited in the proximity of a śūdra. //11//

And nobody must give an advice to a śūdra nor the remains of one’s own food nor the food made into an oblation; neither to him one should explain the Dharma nor to him precribe a penance. //12//

Whosoever would explain the Dharma to him, and whosoever would prescribe a penance to him, he will fall together with the śūdra into the dreadful darkness [called] Asaṃṛṭa. //13//

… Any woman of black color is only for being enjoyed not for [fulfilling] the Dharma, not for [fulfilling] the Dharma. //16//

---

32 Jaimini, Mīmāṁsādārśana, Adhāya 6, Pāda 1, Sūtras 37 and 38, and Śābara ad locum. refer to the prohibition (pratiśiddha) for the śūdra of studying (adhyayana) the Veda, and Śābara gives as support of this prohibition the fact of the śūdra being “a burial ground” (śmaśāna).

33 Not for constituting a family according to Law, nor to be included in the corresponding religious rites.
The *Gautamadharmaśūtra*, Dr. Umesh Chandra Pandey ed., Varanasi: Chowkamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1966 (The Kashi Sanskrit Series 172), p. 118, indicates the punishments corresponding to the śūdra who dares to hear, to recite or to memorize the sacred text of the *Veda*:

\[
\text{atha hāṣya vedaṃ upaśṛyatas trapujatubhyāṃ śrotapratipūraṇam udāharane jihvāccchedo dhārāne sarirabhedah} /\text{/4}//
\]

“Now of the śūdra who hears the *Veda*, [the punishment is] filling up his ears with tin and lac; if he recites [the *Veda*], cutting off of his tongue; if he keeps [the *Veda*] in his memory, death. /\text{/4}//

Which was the foundation of this legal, religious, human degradation of the śūdra?

As we have already said the remote basis of the caste system in Brahmanic India was a lonely stanza (12) of the *Rig Veda* X, 90, which contains the myth of Creation of living beings from the Puruṣa: the brāhmans were considered the purest beings because of having been born from the mouth; the śūdras were considered the most impure because of having been born from the lowest part of the body, the feet. It was generally considered that the *impurity* of the śūdras reached the utmost possible level, as it is shown by their arbitrary identification with *a burial ground*. Cf. *Vasiṣṭhasmyti* 18, §§ 10 and 11, quoted before, and Śābara’s commentary *ad locum*, referred to in note 32.

Together with this myth of Creation in the *Rig Veda* there is another one which explains the creation of beings by Prajāpati in a different way but equally maintaining and justifying the abject position of the śūdras in society. In *Pañcaviṃśaṃbrāhmaṇa* or *Tāṇḍyamahābrāhmaṇa* VI, 1, 11, it is said:

\[
\text{sa patta eva pratiṣṭhāyā ekaviṃśam asṛjata [;] tam anuṣṭupchando ‘nvasṛjyata [;] na kā cana devatā [;] śūdro manuṣyas [;] tasmād chūdra uta bahupaśur ayajīyo vīdeo hi [;] na hi tam kā cana devatā ‘nvasṛjyata [;] tasmāt pāḍāvanejyaṃ nātī vardhate [;] patto hi srṣṭas [;] tasmād ekaviṃśastomānāṃ pratiṣṭhā [;] pratiṣṭhāyā hi srṣṭas [;] tasmād anuṣṭubhaṃ chandāṃṣi nānu vyūhanti} /\text{/11}//
\]

“He [= Prajāpati] from his feet, his support, created the *Ekaviṃśaṃstoma*\textsuperscript{34}; along with it was created the *Anuṣṭubh* meter; no deity; as man, the śūdra; therefore the śūdra certainly, although having much cattle, is excluded from the sacrifice, because he has no god, because no deity was created along with him; therefore he does not go beyond washing another’s feet [= the feet of the higher castes], for he [= the śūdra] is created from the [Prajāpati’s] feet; therefore the *Ekaviṃśa* among the stomas\textsuperscript{35} is the support; for it was created from the support, therefore [the reciters of the rite\textsuperscript{36}] do not transpose the *Anuṣṭubh* meters along

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\textsuperscript{34} A typical form of praise consisting in twenty one parts.

\textsuperscript{35} We follow the interpretation of Sāyaṇa’s commentary.

\textsuperscript{36} The *Dvādasāśa* or Twelve-day rite. Cf. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* IV, 23-28.
Thus it is merely on mythical accounts and ritualistic speculations conceived by brāhmans, and characterized by fancy and arbitrariness that the whole system of castes was supported, and the low condition of the sūdras was established for ever, being internalized also for ever the idea of their degradation from the inner part of all the individuals belonging to any of the castes, including the sūdras themselves.

In fact, it is not difficult to discover the true reasons which impelled the Indo-Europeans that conquered India and the upper castes that were chiefly constituted by them to establish that peculiar system: the _ambition_ of acquiring power and authority, the covetousness to get for their undertakings workers to whom they had not to pay any salary, and the greed to become the owners of their riches and properties – in other words, the tendency to the exploitation of man by man so much inserted in human nature, and whereof History unfortunately gives so many instances. The ominous practice of slavery was defended not only in India but also in the West. One can read in Aristotle, _Politics_ I, 2, pp. 1253-1255 (Bekker’s numeration), and Saint Thomas, _Summa Theologiae_ II, II, 57, 2 and 58, 3, and _Summa contra Gentiles_ III, 81, arguments for the defense of the practice of slavery.

Unfortunately it cannot be denied that the Brahmanic society was a wicked social organization, source of suffering for many millions of human beings. Its principal characteristics were the arrogance of the brāhmans, the ignominy into which the sūdras were thrown without any feeling of compassion, and the irrational beliefs and absurd reasoning on which that social organization was based. It was a society which showed a complete lack of the _ahimsā_ feeling. Violence was necessarily resorted to, when the Āryans conquered India, as there has been violence in all conquest all over the world, and the act of reducing the sūdras to their painful, inhuman condition was also a violent act.

It was in such a society that around 500 of the Common Era the Buddha preached in Indian his lofty universal Dharma. It was a light which offered a new conception of human relations and also a model, never to be equaled, of an author or creator of a novel message destined to serve mankind as a guide for its conduct – whatever be the nature we attribute to this message: religion, ethics, philosophy or humanism.

**Buddhism**

_The Bodhi of the Buddha_

If Brahmanism begins with the _Shruti_, with a _revealed Text_, believed to contain the Ultimate Truth, Buddhism on the contrary starts with a _human act_: the knowledge of the true way of being of reality, a discovery attained by a man, the Buddha, after great efforts (vīryā), not adhered to by authority or belief.

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37 See _Aitareya Brāhmaṇa_ IV, 27. The “other meters” are: the _Gāyatrī_, the _Tristubh_, and the _Jagati_.

The Buddha in His princely life comes to know the manifold forms of sensual pleasure and of the familiar affection, but He also discovers at the same time that man is a being submitted to suffering originated by old age, illness and death – all of them faces of impermanence; He abandons all: family, possessions, royal status, and elects a homeless life seeking the Path of Knowledge which could carry Him beyond suffering. He follows the teachings of several masters, but He abandons them, because He considers that their teachings cannot bring Him to the goal which He intends to reach. Thus, alone, full of confidence in himself, he begins his search of Truth and, after incredible efforts, intents, failures, in a memorable night He attains Enlightenment (Bodhi), the supreme act of Knowledge, which reveals Him the Truth that will constitute His doctrine. It is not a world of heavenly pleasures which unfolds before His vision; he has not the feeling of the presence of a divine person; he does not enjoy quintessential spiritual delights. His experience may be condensed in a sentence of philosophical inspiration and unlimited metaphysical possibilities: “All that exists has a cause, and, with the elimination of the cause the effect is eliminated” (*paṭiccasamuppāda/pratītyasamutpāda*). 39

_The Buddhist Doctrine as the collection of Laws which govern the physical order, the moral order and the course of the salvific action_

In fact it is possible to consider that the Buddhist Doctrine is, in a great majority of instances, the enunciation of the numerous laws or principles (*dharmas*) which regulate reality, including human action and conduct, in all its aspects and which were discovered by the Buddha after a long period of observation and reflection. 40

Let us mention, as examples of these laws (*dharma*) those referred to by the _Lotus Sūtra_ (Nanjio and Kern edition): p. 17, line 13, p. 18, line 11, p. 80, line 6, the _Caturāryyasatya_ or “Four Noble Truths” (or the Law that regulate the course of the salvific action); p. 17, line 14, p. 18, line 11, p. 179, line 4, p. 376, line 6, the _Pratītyasamutpāda_ or

39 Cf. _Udāna_ I, 1 and 2. Many Buddhist texts express that the discovery by the Buddha of the _paṭiccasamuppāda/pratītyasamutpāda_ took place during the middle watch or the last watch of the night in which He attained the _Bodhi_ (Enlightenment). That indicates the importance this doctrine possesses as being discovered in the most significant moment of the Buddha's life. See the texts quoted by É. Lamotte, “Die bedingte Entstehung und die höchste Erleuchtung”, in _Beiträge zur Indienforschung_, Berlin: Museum für indische Kunst, 1977, pp. 282-283: _Taishō_ 187, p. 595 b 6-595 c 24; _Mahāvastu_ II, p. 285, lines 7-18; _Lalitavistara_, pp. 346, line 1-348, line 15; _Taishō_ 189, p. 642 a 20-642 b 10; _Taishō_ 190, pp. 794 c 12-795 b 19; _Buddhacarita_ of Aśvaghoṣa, XIV, verses 49-86; _Nidānakathā_, p. 75, lines 25-26.

40 In their important study on the Pāli term _dhamma_, “Pāli DHAMMA vornehmlich in der kanonischen Literatur”, in Wilhelm Geiger, _Kleine Schriften zur Indologie und Buddhismuskunde_, herausgegeben von Heinz Bechert, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1973, pp. 101-228, Magdalene and Wilhelm Geiger classify with great detail the different meanings of the word in its diverse contexts, and the first significance they analyse is precisely that of “Gesetz”, “Law”, and their synonyms. Franklin Edgerton in his _Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary_, Vol. II, _Dictionary_, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, p. 277, expresses that he has not included the meaning of “law” for _dharma_, since this meaning is “both extremely common and hardly un-Sanskrit”. 
“Law of Dependent Origination or Causality”; p. 9, stanza 6, p. 354, line 9, the Karmavipāka or “Law of the moral retribution of actions”; in many places, the Śūnyatā or “Voidness”, the metaphorical expression of the most important notions of Insubstantiality, Universal contingency.\(^42\)

In our article “Buddhist Conception of Reality”, in Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Vol. XIV, Number 1, September-December 1996, pp. 35-64, we enumerate some Buddhist laws and quote the texts containing the references to them: the law of the universal interdependence of all that exists (p. 49), the law of the inevitable destruction of all that arises (p. 52), the law of the collective force possessed by the totality of the individual karmans that determines the destiny of the universe as a whole: its destruction, its new creation, the special features it will possess in its new stage of existence, the events which will occur in it, etc. (p. 53).

Thanks to these laws, principles, norms, to which the empirical reality in its integrity is submitted, the Buddhist universe appears as an organized system, as a cosmos. These laws have not been imposed by a God, Creator and Governor of the Universe. These laws have not been created by the Buddha either. They have not been revealed to Him by any superior power or even by any human teacher. They are not a construction of His mind. He has not invented them. They exist from a beginningless eternity, valid by themselves, always the same, inalterable, necessary, acting with an ineludible force, not being possible for anything to escape the rigor of their dominion.

In the Saṃyuktāgama (Nidānasamyukta, Bhikṣusūtra), in Chandrabhāl Tripāṭhi, Fünfundzwanzig Sūtras des Nidānasamyukta, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962, pp. 164-165, Sūtras 17 and 18, there is a characterization, in positive terms (anuloma or samudaya), of the Pratītyasamutpāda which may be applied to all the laws; at the end of this quotation there is a reference in the text to the negative terms (pratiloma or nirodha) for expressing the Law:

\[17 \text{kin nu bhagavatā pratītyasamutpādāḥ kṛta aho svid anyaiḥ /}  \\
\text{na bhikṣo mayā pratītyasamutpādāḥ kṛto nāpy anyaiḥ /}  \\
\text{api tūtpādād vā tathāgatānām anutpādād vā sthitā eveyaṃ dharmatā dharmasthitaye dhātuḥ/}  \\
\text{18 tām tathāgataḥ svayam abhijñāyābhisambuddhyākhyāti prajñāpayati prasthāpayati vibhajāti vivarātī uttānikaroti deśayati saṃprakāśayati /}  \\
\text{yadutāsmin satīdaṃ bhavaty asyotpādād idam utpadyate/ …} \]

17 “Has the Dependent Origination been made by the Bhagavant or by others? 

\(^{41}\) See C. Dragonetti, “Śūnyatā in the Lotus Sūtra”, in Hokke-Bunka Kenkyū, Tokyo, No. 26, March 2000, pp. 63-84.

O Bhikṣu, the Dependent Origination has not been made by me [the Buddha] nor by others. Whether Tathāgatas arise or do not arise, stable is the fact of being a Law [proper of the Pratītyasamutpāda], the foundation for the stability of all things.

18 The Tathāgata having known and comprehended it [= the Pratītyasamutpāda] perfectly by Himself, declares, makes known, establishes, analyses, reveals, proclaims, teaches, manifests it:

‘given this, occurs that; from the arising of this, that arises’ …”

The Chinese translation of the Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra (Ta chi tu lun), Taishō 1509, p. 298 a, lines 11-19, quotes the same passage of the Bhikṣusūtra of the Saṃyuktāgama (Tsa a han) on the Law of Dependent Origination, and interprets (in lines 13-14) the last line of Sanskrit paragraph 17 in the sense:

有佛無佛諸法如法相法位常有

“Whether the Buddhas exist or the Buddhas do not exist, the Tathāta of all the Laws, the nature of the Laws, the stability of the Laws, is eternally existent”

And the autor of the Ta chi tu lun concludes (in line 19), after quoting the Bhikṣusūtra:

如是生滅法有佛無佛常

“Thus the utpāda-nirodha [of all things, i.e. the Dependent Origination in both ways, anuloma or positive, and pratiloma or negative], whether the Buddhas exist or not, is eternally existent.”

Insubstantiality: Non-acceptance of the Shruti, Brahman and the Ātman

Buddhism places thus at its beginning –as already said- the discovery by the Buddha of the laws that regulate reality. Among these laws the most important is the Law of Dependent Origination of all that exists, and as such it was considered the contents of His Enlightenment. It is the basis of the whole metaphysical system of Buddhism.

The Śālistambasūtra hints at this importance when in its beginning it asserts:

yo bhiṣavah pratītyasamutpādaṁ paśyati, sa dharmam paśyati, yo dharmam paśyati, sa buddham paśyati

“He who sees the Pratītyasamutpāda, sees the Dharma; he who sees the Dharma, sees the Buddha”.

For Buddhism all has a cause, consequently it does not accept the existence of a substance, in the sense commonly given to this term: something which exists ab se, is the reason or cause of itself (causa sui), and does not receive its existence ab alio; something
which exists in se, does not require any place, abode or receptacle in which to exist; something which exists per se, and is not in need of anything or anybody in order to subsist.\footnote{On the concept of substance see the articles: “Substanz / Akzidens” by diverse authors, in Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, Vol. 10, col. 495-553; “Substanz” by J. Mittelstrass, in Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie, Vol. IV, pp. 133-136; and “Substancia”, in J. Ferrater Mora, Diccionario de Filosofía, Vol. IV, pp. 3397-3407.} Buddhism proclaims universal contingency, relativity, insubstantiality.\footnote{Cf. C. Dragonetti, “An Indian Philosophy of Universal Contingency: Nāgārjuna’s School”, article quoted in note 42.}

Owing to its negation of substance Buddhism does not admit the existence either of Brahman (the Absolute), or of the Ātman (the individual soul), considered the substances par excellence. The negation of Brahman and Ātman meant the negation of the unity under multiplicity, and at the same time the affirmation of the universal plurality. Buddhism is so an insubstantialist and pluralistic system of thought.\footnote{The pluralistic position of Buddhism is clearly shown by the theory of dharmas, which reduces reality to an infinite number of instantaneous processes. Cf. Th. Stcherbatsky, The central conception of Buddhism and the meaning of the word “dharma”, Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1961; and F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, “La doctrina de los dharmas en el Budismo”, in Yoga y Mística de la India, Buenos Aires: Editorial Kier, 1978, pp. 91-121.}

This also implied the denial of the Shruti provided with characteristics which grant it the status of a substance. All this carried with itself also the negation of the authority of all the sacred texts of Brahmanism. Buddhism does not acknowledge to them any value as ultimate criterion of truth, as depository of the norms which regulate man’s conduct as a member of society and in his relations with the Gods. Buddhism ignores the Shruti, the very foundation of Brahmanism.

In this negation of substance maintained by Buddhism lies one of its oppositions to Brahmanism, perhaps the one most significant and rich in consequences.

**Nirvāṇa**

Buddhism accepted the Indian traditional doctrines of reincarnations and karman, integrated them in its system of thought and made them an essential foundation of its teachings. Buddhism, as Brahmanism, looks for Liberation from the cycle of reincarnations.

For Brahmanism Liberation from reincarnations implied the absorption in Brahman, to be identified with It, to be It; for Buddhism Liberation meant the cessation of suffering essentially linked to existence, i.e. Nirvāṇa. This conception was logical and coherent with Buddhist doctrines, since Buddhism did not admit any substantial principle in man, which could subsist after the cessation, with the last reincarnation, of the series of the impermanent and insubstantial processes (dharmas), which constitute man.

**The Gods**
The ancient Vedic and Brahmanic Gods are in some way accepted by Buddhism, but they appear in it as submitted to reincarnations and fulfilling very subaltern functions (as that of giving a good advice), and moreover they are even considered inferior to men, since only in human existence it is possible to attain Enlightenment, and as a result of it, Nirvāṇa. Such an achievement is denied to the Gods, who to reach it have to be reborn as men. Moreover, the Gods in Buddhism try to get merits (as giving alms to the Buddhist monks or paying them respectful services) in order to improve their karman and gain a better reincarnation which brings them near to Liberation. Gods occupy in Buddhism a place strongly inferior to that they had in Brahmanism.46

The rite and the worship

Rites and worship do not play any significant role in ancient Indian Buddhism. In order to obtain the summun bonum, Liberation from reincarnations (Nirvāṇa), man can only rely upon the Buddha’s Teachings and himself. By means of his own personal effort, energy, resolution, constancy, man can adjust his conduct to those Teachings and thus obtain the reward that they offer. Nobody, nothing can help him in this personal task.

In the Majjhima Nikāya, Gaṇakamoggallānasuttam, III (107), p. 6 (PTS), Buddha, after giving a gradual exposition of His Doctrine that can lead to Liberation, proclaims that even He is only a Master that shows the Way, but that it depends on each one to enter that Path, and follow it until he attains the goal overcoming the difficulties of which it is full:

\[
\text{evam eva kho, brāhmaṇa, \textit{titṭhat’eva nībōnaṁ titthati nībbāṇagāminaggio tiṭṭhām’ahaṁ samādapetā. Attha ca pana mama sāvakā māyā evam ovadiyamānā evam anusāsiyamānā appekace accantaniṭṭhāṁ nībānaṁ ārādhenti ekacce n’ārādhenti. Ethisa kvāhaṁ, brāhmaṇa, karomi? – maggakkhāyī, brāhmaṇa, tathāgato ti.}
\]

“Thus, O brāhman, the Nirvāṇa exists, the Path leading to Nirvāṇa exists, I exist as adviser. But some of my disciples, advised and instructed by me, reach Nirvāṇa of absolute perfection, some do not reach it. What can I do, O brāhman, on this matter? The Tathāgata is only a shower of the Path.”47

Contrarily to what happened in Brahmanism the rite does not contribute to Liberation. The Dīgha Nikāya I, Tevijjasuttam, pp. 235-253 (PTS), clearly expresses this absolute ineficacy of the rite. In this Sutta Buddha denies the brāhmans the possibility to teach the path that leads to the God Brahmā, since no one of them, no one of their most illustrious ancestors has been able to see or to know Him. In this same Sutta Buddha asserts that the prayers and requests addressed to the Gods by the brāhmans in their ceremonies are


47 Cf. Dhammapada 276.
completely useless and vain. They are like the cries, requests, petitions, supplications that a man, standing in the shore of a river and wishing to cross it, directs to the other shore in order that it comes to him.

Not less strong is the criticism of the sacrifices of living beings, common in Brahmanism, made by the Buddhist texts. For instance in the Kūṭadantasuttam of the Dīgha Nikāya I, pp. 127-149 (PTS), on referring to the “ideal sacrifice”, Buddha describes a sacrifice which does not involve the customary killing of living beings as those performed by the brāhmans in their rites and where a series of requisites of moral nature must be followed. Moreover, Buddha declares that there exist a great number of practices and kinds of conduct, which are superior even to that “ideal sacrifice” and much more to the traditional sacrifices. Among these practices the highest level is occupied by the adhesion to the Buddha’s Teachings and by the conformity of one’s own conduct to them.

If rites and worship and sacrifices do not help man at all to bring him near the supreme goal of Liberation and Nirvāṇa, neither have they the power to purify him of any moral impurity he may have contracted. Moral impurity is something interior and personal that only through moral acts, born from morals inspiration, can be eliminated.48

These ideas are coherent with the internalization of morals that Buddhism propounds. Buddhism condemns as useless the ritual practices and ceremonies as well as sacrifices and ascetic mortifications, since all of them remain in the exterior and do not belong for Buddhism to the truly moral sphere.

In Udāna I, 9, it is narrated that the Buddha sees a great number of ascetics plunged in cold water during the freezing nights of the winter, thinking that in this way they would gain purity (iminā suddhitā).

The Buddha on that occasion commented:

\[
na udakena suci hoti, bahv ettha nhāyatī jano, 
yamhi saccañ ca dhammo ca, so suci so ca brāhmano’ti //9//
\]

“Not by water man becomes pure; people here bathe too much; in whom there is truth and morality, he is pure, he is (really) a brāhman.”

In a similar way the Lotus Sūtra, at the beginning of its Chapter XVIII, expresses that purification or purity of the functions of the six sense organs is carried out by the practices of keeping in mind, reciting, teaching, transcribing the Dharma-paryāya constituted by the Lotus Sūtra with the purpose of incorporating its teachings and moral values, and thus attain the goal of the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment:

---

“Any son [or daughter] of virtuous family who shall keep in mind or shall recite or shall teach or shall transcribe this Teaching of the Doctrine – together with⁴⁹ these many hundred good qualities [mentioned before and corresponding to each sense organ] the whole of his sense organs will become pure, extremely pure.”

**The negation of the castes**

The Buddhist negation of the authority of the Śruti, as a consequence of its being an entity dependent on causes - that could be, for instance, one or several human authors and/or the compilation of traditions or beliefs common to the social community originated in the course of time – made the Śruti nothing else than a human product that could be analyzed in the light of humanitarian moral criteria.

This new Buddhist interpretation of the Śruti may lead to the acceptance or the rejection of the caste institution, but anyhow deprived the castes of all transcendent or divine origin.

Buddhism, owing to the importance it gave always and everywhere to *ethical values*, could not accept the caste institution, which divided men into closed groups, distributed rights and privileges, organized social hierarchy according *only to birth*, beyond any moral concern, and according also only to birth elevated some men to the condition of Gods and sink others into the most abject and cruel conditions of life. In such a society where was justice and ethics?⁵⁰

In many texts Buddhism discards *birth* as the criterion for fixing the place of the individual in society, and asserts that the criterion must be *knowledge* and *moral values*.


> Khattiyo setṭho jane tasmiṃ ye gotta-paṭisārino.

> Vijjācaraṇa-sampanno so setṭho deva-mānuse ti.

“The *kshatriya* is the best among those people who believe in lineage;

---

⁴⁹ We understand the Sanskrit *ebhir bahubhir guṇaśataih* as a sociative instrumental.

but he, who is endowed with knowledge and good conduct, is the best among Gods and men”.

- In Dīgha Nikāya III, XXVII. Aggaṇṇa-Suttanta, 31, p. 97 (PTS), which deals with the evolution of the world, of man and of society, the Buddha, examining the four castes, concludes that the moral norm (dhamma) is above lineage:

31. ‘Imesaḥ hi Vāseṭṭha catunnaṃ vaṃśānaṃ yo hoti bhikkhu arahanti khipāsavo kata-karaṇīyo ohiṭā-bhāro anupatta-sadatttho parikkhiṇa-bhava-saṃyojano sammad-aṇṇī vimutto, so nesaṃ aggam akkhāyati dhammen’ eva no adhammena.

“For, Vāseṭṭha, whosoever of the four castes being a monk, becomes an arhant, who has destroyed the impurities, who has done what he had to do, who has laid down the burden, who has reached the highest goal, who has destroyed the fetters of existence, who through perfect knowledge is liberated, he is declared the most excellent person, with justice (dhammena) and not unjustly (adhammena).”

- In the Vāseṭṭhasutta of the Sutta Nīpāta, pp. 146-148, 154 (57) (The Harvard Oriental Series ed. 1932), the young brāhmaṇs Vāseṭṭha and his friend Bhāradvāja discussed in a certain occasion as to what makes a true brāhmaṇ. Bhāradvāja’s explanation was: “pure descent (jāti) in the lineage from seven generations of ancestors”, whereas Vāseṭṭha maintained that “moral discipline” (sīla) or “moral actions” (kamma) made a true brāhmaṇ:

Bhāradvājo māṇaṇo evam āha: - Yato kho, bho, ubhato sujāto hoti māṭito ca pītīto ca saṃsuddhagahaniko yāva sattamā pitāmahayugā, akkhitto anupakkūṭṭho jātiyādena, ettāvatā kho, bho, brāhmaṇo hoti. Vāseṭṭha māṇaṇo evam āha: - Yato kho, bho, sīlavā ca hoti vatasampanno ca, ettāvatā kho, bho, brāhmaṇo hoti …

“The young brāhmaṇ Bhāradvāja said so: ‘My dear friend, if one is of pure descent on both sides, from mother and from father, coming from a clean womb back through seven generations of forbears, not criticized, irreproachable in point of birth, then, my dear friend, one is a brāhmaṇ’. The young brāhmaṇ Vāseṭṭha said so: ‘My dear friend, if one is endowed with moral discipline and good conduct, then, my dear friend, he is a brāhmaṇ’…”

As both friends could not reach an agreement between them, they consulted the Buddha, who, after describing all the moral possibilities and practical actions for man, concludes saying that it is not birth but moral actions what make the true brāhmaṇ:

Na jaccā ‘Brāhmaṇo’ hoti, na jaccā hoti ‘abrāhmaṇo’;
- kammanā ‘Brāhmaṇo’ hoti; kammanā hoti ‘abrāhmaṇo’ //57//

[The Buddha said:] “Not by birth one is a brāhmaṇ, not by birth one is a non-brāhmaṇ; by moral action one is a brāhmaṇ,
by moral action one is a non-brähman”//57// (650)

- Among the later Buddhist philosophers who dealt with the Buddhist subject-matter of the equality of all men let us mention Aśvaghoṣa51.

Aśvaghoṣa (Ma ming, 馬鳴, in Chinese; Rta-dbyaṅs, in Tibetan; Memyō -or Ashibakusha- in Japanese) was considered by the Buddhist tradition as belonging to the Mahāyāna. Probably this opinion is correct taking into account the following facts.

He was a contemporary of King Kanishka, 2nd century of the Common Era, when Mahāyāna Buddhism was fully established.

I-tsing, A Record of the Buddhist Religion as practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago (A.D. 671-695), translated by J. Takakusu, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, p. 181, refers to those masters that become famous in Jambudvīpa (India) and receive respect above gods and men, and serve under the Buddha promoting his Doctrine which leads to Nirvāṇa. Among these masters I-tsing mentions Nāgārjuna, [Ārya]Deva, Aśvaghoṣha “of an early age”; Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, Saṅghabhadra, Bhavaviveka, in the middle ages; Dharmapāla, Dharmakīrti, Śilabhadra, Śhiramati, Günamati, Prajñāgupta, Günaprabha, Jinaprabha, of late years (p. 181).


In the Tibetan Buddhist Canon nineteen works are attributed to Aśvaghoṣa (= Rta-dbyaṅs), according to A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons (Bkha-hgyur and Bstan-hgyur), edited by H. Ui and others, Sendai, Japan: Tōhoku Imperial University, 1934: 1147, 1149, 1753, 2478, 2479, 2730, 3721, 3911, 3912, 4156, 4167, 4177, 4178, 4390, 4503, 4505, 4510, 4518, 4519. The Vajraśucī is not mentioned in the Tibetan Buddhist Canon.

The great majority of the texts mentioned by the Chinese and the Tibetan Buddhist Canons attributed to Aśvaghoṣa are evidently of Mahāyānist inspiration. Nevertheless let us say that several works attributed by Chinese or Tibetan sources to Aśvaghoṣa may not belong to him.

Notwithstanding the attribution of the Vajraśucī to Dharmakīrti by the Taishō we consider that the author of this text is Aśvaghoṣa relying on the Indian Sanskrit manuscript tradition accepted by the modern editors and translators of the work. The fact of his being a Mahāyānist is corroborated by Aśvaghoṣa’s initial salutation to Mañjuśrī, which precedes the text of Vajraśucī. And what can be said for sure is that ‘Aśvaghoṣa’, the author

of *Vajrasūcī*, was an Indian brähman converted to Buddhism, as it is shown by his great knowledge of Brahmanic literature in the quotations of this text, and that this Sanskrit work ‘*Vajrasūcī*’ was considered worthy of being translated into Chinese at least already in the 10th century of the Common Era by an important Chinese translator as Fa-t’ien (Hōten, in Japanese).

In his *Vajrasūcī* Aśvaghōṣa rejects the claims of the brähmans on their human and social superiority and on the inferiority of the śūdras, and even the very existence of the four castes – all this due to birth.

The text begins, as we have said, with a salutation to Bodhisattva Mañjugūṣṭha (Mañjugrī):

*Jagadgurum Mañjugrīṣṭhaṃ natvā vākkāyacetasā*  
*Aśvaghōṣa Vajrasūcīṃ sūtrayāmi yathāmatam*

“Having paid homage to Mañjugrīṣṭha, the Spiritual Teacher of Universe, with voice, body and mind”

I, Aśvaghōṣa, put in the form of sūtras the *Vajrasūcī* according to the best of my thought.”

The arguments to support his theses against the caste system are fundamentally constituted by quotations from the most respected books of Brahmanism, as the *Veda, Manusmṛti, Mahābhārata*.

Examples of his quotations from Brahmanic texts that favour Buddhist conception of man in society are for instance, *Vajrasūcī*, stanzas 39, 41 and 42 (Weber’s ed.):

\[
\text{na kulena na jātyā vā kriyābhīr brāhmaṇo bhavet} / \\
\text{caṇḍālo’pi hi vṛttastho brāhmaṇaḥ sa Yudhiṣṭhira //39// [Weber = //40//} \\
\text{Mukhopadhyaya]}
\]


Aśvaghosa’s *Vajrasūcī* must not be confounded with the *Vajrasūcī[ka]-Upanishad*, many times attributed to Śaṅkara, which ends asserting that a brahmin is verily the person who has developed in himself moral qualities that allow him to reach the knowledge of the ātman. This Upanishad has been edited and translated by Weber in his quoted book, pp. 211-217, and in S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953, pp. 935-938

32
sarve vai yonijā martyāḥ sarve mūtrapūriśīṇaḥ /
ekendraiyendriyāṛthiś ca tasmācchīlagnaiṣa vaijīṭḥ //41// [Weber = //42//
Mukhopadhyaya]

śūdraḥ pī śīlasampanno guṇāvān brāhmaṇo bhavet /
brāhmaṇo pī kriyāhīnaḥ śūdrā pratyaparo bhavet //42// [Weber = //43//
Mukhopadhyaya]

"Not by lineage nor by birth [but] by his [moral] actions
one becomes a brāhman;
since even a chaṇḍala [= śūdra] devoted to virtuous conduct
is a brāhman, O Yudhiṣṭhira!

All [men] indeed are born from a womb and are mortals,
all carry within themselves urine and excrements,
all possess the same sense-organs with the same objects of senses;
therefore [only] by moral discipline and good qualities
[men] become brāhmans.

Even a śūdra, endowed with moral discipline and good qualities,
becomes a brāhman;
even a brāhman devoid of [moral] actions
becomes inferior to the śūdra”.

Buddhism not only did criticize Brahmanic organization of castes based on birth
but also created inside the Brahmanic society a Buddhist society inspired in the noble
intellectual and moral values preached by the Buddha in India, and that afterwards
disseminated all over Asia.

The Buddhist society: Past and Present

- The most important features of Buddhist society is the absolute equality of all its
members. They are all “the sons of the Buddha”; in all of them is present the
Tathāgatagarbha, and thus they have all the capacity to become Buddhas, as all the Buddhas
that have existed in the past, among whom Śākyamuni Buddha stands out; all of them have
access to the knowledge of the Buddha’s Doctrine, nothing prevents them to obtain it, it
will lead them to the desired goal of Enlightenment and Liberation. As a consequence of
this conception the division of society in castes does not exist within Buddhist Community.
For Buddhism, all men being equal, birth does not originate any difference among them in
terms of hierarchy or grant them any particular privilege.53 Any person -not matter to which

247; G.P. Malalasekera and K.N. Jayatilleke, Le Bouddhisme et la Question Raciale, already quoted in note
50, pp. 53-66.
caste he belonged—on entering the Indian Buddhist Community, lost his ancient caste, and together with the caste his family name, which hinted at the caste to which he had belonged. He became really a new man. As for instance, the brāhmans who converted to Buddhism, on entering the Buddhist Community, were not any more brāhmans, and the privileges, which as such they possessed, disappeared.\(^\text{54}\) We give in what follows the well-known text of the Anguttara Nikāya IV, p. 202 (XIX. 14, Pahārādasutta), which forcibly describes the social consequences produced by the entrance into the Saṅgha:

Seyyathā pi Pahārāda, yā kāci mahānadiyo, seyyathīdāṇa Gaṅgā Yamunā Aciravatī Sarabhū Mahī, tā mahāsamuddaṃ patvā, jahanti purimāṇi nāmāgottāṇī, mahāsamuddaṃ tveva sāṃkhaṇaṃ gacchanti: evam eva kho Pahārāda cattāro 'me vannā: khattiya brāhmaṇā vessā suiddā, te Tathāgatappavedite dhammadīnaṃ agārasmā anagāriyāṃ pabbajītvā jahanti purimāṇi nāmāgottāṇī, samaṇaḥ Sakyaputtiyā tveva sāṃkhaṇaṃ gacchanti. Yaṃ pi Pahārāda cattāro 'me vannā: khattiya brāhmaṇā vessā suiddā, te Tathāgatappavedite dhammadīnaṃ agārasmā anagāriyāṃ pabbajītvā jahanti purimāṇi nāmāgottāṇī, samaṇaḥ Sakyaputtiyā tveva sāṃkhaṇaṃ gacchanti: ayaṃ Pahārāda imasmiṃ dhammadīnaṃ catuttho acchariyo abhūta dhammo, yaṃ disvā disvā bhikkhū imasmiṃ dhammadīnaṃ abhiramanti /

“Just as, O Pahārāda, the great rivers, for instance, the Gangā, the Yamunā, the Aciravatī, the Sarabhū, the Mahī, entering the Great Ocean, lose their former names and identities, and receive the only name of ‘Great Ocean’, in the same way, O Pahārāda, these four castes: kshatriyas, brāhmans, vaishyas and śūdras, having gone out from home into a homeless life according to the Discipline of the Dharma proclaimed by the Tathāgata, they lose their former names and lineages and receive the only name of ‘samaṇas sons of the Sakya’. That the four castes: kshatriyas, brāhmans, vaishyas and śūdras, having gone out from home into a homeless life according to the Discipline of the Dharma proclaimed by the Tathāgata, lose their former names and lineages and receive the only name of ‘samaṇas sons of the Sakya’—this is, O Pahārāda, in the Discipline of the Dharma, something wonderful and marvelous which the monks enjoy seeing once and again!”

- The conversion into Buddhism and the entrance in the Buddhist Community meant for the converts, especially for brāhmans, a great change: the lost of their brahmanic names and the oblivion of their brahmanic lineage, as has been stated. But it meant also something very important for them: the relegation of Sanskrit in favor of the Prakrit languages, among which Pāli is to be counted, and which were used by common people in the different regions of India. Sanskrit has a very important presence in Indian Culture. It was the language of the brahmanic sacred scriptures, of the epic and historic works, and of the valuable productions of classical literature. Great grammarians had dedicated to Sanskrit their technical acumen in order to make of it an extraordinary instrument of thought. But

\(^{54}\) The word “brāhman” acquires in Buddhism a new meaning: one is not a “brāhman” because he belongs to a Brahmanic family, but because he possesses the noble virtues that Buddhism proclaimed, among which stand out benevolence, compassion and detachment.
Sanskrit was also a symbol of the three pure castes, mainly of the brāhmans; the śudras sunken in poverty and ignorance were excluded from it. The Buddha with His usual fine perspicacity and profound sense of justice ordered that His Message had to be transmitted in the Prakrit languages proper of each region where it came to be preached, so that it could reach all the members of society without exception.

In the Cullavagga (Vinaya Piṭaka, Vol. II, 5, 33, p. 139 (PTS) the Buddha clearly expresses His position in relation to language:

Tena kho pana samayena Yameḷutekulā nāma bhikkhū dve bhātikā honti brāhmaṇājātikā kalyāṇavācā kalyāṇavākkaraṇā. te yena bhagavā ten’ upasaṃkamitvā bhagavantaṃ abhivādetvā ekamantaṃ nisīdiṃsu, ekamantaṃ nisinnā kho te bhikkhū bhagavantaṃ etad avocum: etarāhi bhante bhikkhū nānānāmā nānāgottā nānājaccā nānakulā pabbajitā, te sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ dūṣenti. handa mayaṃ bhante buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā ’ti. vigarahi buddho bhagavā: kathaṃ hi nāma tumhe moghapurisā evaṃ vakkhatha: handa mayaṃ bhante buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā ’ti. 55 netaṃ moghapurisā, appasannānaṃ vā pasādāya, pasannānaṃ vā bhīyobbhāvāya / atha khvetaṃ, moghapurisā, appasannānaṃ ceva appasādāya, pasannānaṃ ca ecaccānaṃ aññathattaya” ’ti / atha kho bhagavā te bhikkhū anekapariyāyena vigarahitvā dubbharatāya dupoosotāya maicchāṭāya asantuṭṭhitāya saṅganiṅkāya kosajjassa avaṃṇaṃ bhāṣītīv, anekapariyāyena subbharatāya suppoosatāya appicchhassa santoṭṭhitassa sallekhasa dhutassa pāsādikassa apacayassa viriyārambhassā vaṃṇaṃ bhāṣītīv, bhikkhunasm tad anuechavikaṃ tad anulomikaṃ dhāmminiṃ kathāṃ katvā bhikkhū āṃantesi: “na, bhikkhave, buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropetabbaṃ / yo āropeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassā / anujānāmi, bhikkhave, sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanaṃ pariyoṇiṇiṣṭum” ’ti. //

“In that same occasion there were two monks, brothers, Yameḷu and Tekula by name, brāhmans by birth, of pleasant voice, of clear pronunciation. They approached the Bhagavant, and having approached Him, having greeted the Bhagavant, they sat down by His side; as they were sitting down at His side, these monks said this to the Bhagavant: “At present, Sir, there are monks who have gone out from home, of various names, of various lineages, of various castes, of various families – they spoil with their own dialect the word of the Buddha. Well then let us put in Vedic Sanskrit the word of the Buddha!” The Buddha severely rebuked them: “How is it that you, foolish men, say thus: ‘Well then let us put in Vedic Sanskrit the word of the Buddha!’ This, foolish men, will not be for the belief of the unbelievers, or for the increase of the believers. Rather it will be, foolish men, for the non-belief of the unbelievers, and for the change of mind into delusion of some believers.” And the Bhagavant having rebuked those monks in manifold ways -criticizing the incapacity to support, the incapacity to bear, greediness, discontentedness, the spending time in society, indolence, praising in manifold ways the capacity to support, the capacity to bear, having few wishes, contentedness, austerity, the scrupulous, the amiable, renunciation of wordliness, application of energy, He delivered a sermon according to the Dharma fit for the monks suitable for them, and He said to the monks: “O monks, the word of the Buddha should not be put in Vedic Sanskrit, whoever should put it in Vedic Sanskrit – it is a

55 From here up to the end of this quotation we follow the text of the Nālandā edition.
transgression of wrong doing. I prescribe you, O monks, to learn thoroughly the word of the Buddha in your own dialect.”/1//

- After what has been explained in the previous paragraphs, it is not surprising that the Buddha admitted in His Community (Saṅgha) persons coming from all the levels of the Indian society. The provenance of some of the most important and respected members of the Buddhist Order were castes considered by Brahmanism as low and impure. For instance, Upāli, one of the most eminent disciples of the Buddha, was the son of a barber. Upāli was the monk most versed in the norms of monastic discipline (Vinaya), cf. G.P. Malalasekera, Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1960, Vol. I, pp. 408-410. Among the disciples of the Buddha were also Āṅgulimāla, a robber who was converted by the Buddha (Malalasekera, I, pp. 22-23), and Ambapāli, a courtisan of Vesāli (Malalasekera, I, pp. 155-156), who alternated, in equal conditions, with the brāhmans that in great number entered the Buddhist Order, abandoning prejudices and privileges, and putting at the service of Buddhism their intellectual and literary training. C. Rhys Davids, in her books Psalms of the Early Buddhists, II, Psalms of the Brethren, London: Luzac & Co., 1964, p. XXVIII, gives on the basis of the commentary of the Theragāthās an interesting “Census” of the social origin of the authors of these Gāthās (Poems). Among the 259 authors of the poems 114 were brāhmans, 60 kṣatriyas, 86 belonged to the other lower classes.

- For people of low castes to enter Buddhist Community was the recovery of their human dignity which had been denied to them in Brahmanic society. Once inside the Buddhist Community they were treated as human beings, as equal to the other human beings, with the same capacity, rights and opportunities all human beings have for the achievements of their noblest aspirations in this life and in future lives. Let us present the case of Sunīta, a man belonging to one of the lowest castes in India, that of the street-sweepers, whose meeting with the Buddha instantaneously changed his destiny. In Theragāthā, pp. 63-64 (PTS) the monk Sunita himself narrates that occasion:

Nice kulamhi jāto ṣaṃ daļiddo appabhojano ;
hiṇam kamman maṇam āsi, ahoṣiṃ pupphaḥaḍḍaṭaka. //620//

jigucchito manussānaṃ paribhūto ca vambhito
nīcaṃ maṇaṃ karitvāna vandissāṃ bahukaṃ janaṃ. //621//

ath’ addassāsiṃ sambuddhaṃ bhikkhusaṃghapurakkhatam
pavisantaṃ mahāvīraṃ Magadhānaṃ puruttamam. //622//

nikkhipitvāna byābhāngīṃ vandituṃ upasamkamiṃ;
maṃ’eva anukampāya atthāsi purisuttamo. //623//

vanditvā satthuno pāde ekamantaṃ thito tadā
pabbajjam haṃ ahaṃ āyāciṃ sabbasattānaṃ uttamaṃ //624//

tato kāruṇiko satthā sabbalokānukampako
ehī bhikkhu ‘ti maṃ āha ; să me ās’upasampadā. //625//
“I have been born in a humble family, poor was I and scanty my food; vile my work: I was a rubbish-remover. //620//

Loathed by people, despised, treated with contempt, humbling my mind, I paid homage to most people. //621//

Then I saw the Enlightened followed by His Community of monks, entering the magnificent town of Magadha, He the Great Hero! //622//

I laid aside my basket and approached to pay Him homage; out of compassion for me the Best of Men halted. //623//

Paying homage with my head at the feet of the Master, then standing at His side, I begged, the Best of all Beings, admission into the Order. //624//

Then He, mercifull Master, full of compassion for the whole world, “Come, bhikkhu!” – said to me:
This was for me the Ordination. //625//

And then the monk Sunīta describes (stanzas 626-629) his progress in the spiritual Path and how the Gods came to yield him homage celebrating his great achievements. And Sunīta ends his poem with a last impressive reference to the Buddha:

\[
tato disvāṇa maṁ satthā devaśaṅgha-purakkhaṭaṁ
tsitaṁ pātukaritvāna imaṁ atthaṁ abhāṣatha: //630//
\]

\[
tapena brāhma-cāriyena saṁvyamena daṁena ca
etena brāhmaṇo hoti, etaṁ brāhmaṇaṁ uttaman ti. //631//
\]

Then the Master seeing me honoured by the community of the Gods, revealing a smile, said to me: //630//

By discipline, moral life, self-control, and moderation, hereby one becomes a brāhmaṇ - this is the best state of a true brāhmaṇ. // 631//

- As another important consequence of the disappearance of the castes, Buddhism teaches “an Ethic valid for everybody” (Dharma), opposed to the Brahmanic Ethic constituted by the “One’s own duty” (Svadharma). For Buddhism there is only one moral Path that all men must follow, more rigorous for monks/nuns, less for laymen/laywomen. In Buddhism the system of “one’s own duty” ceases to rule, only one Moral Law is universally valid. The establishment of a unique moral law for its members contributed to the unity of the Community and at the same time was a manifestation of the equality that
Buddhist society is thus a society with features essentially opposed to those of the brahmanic society, and, what is most important, a juster society, because it proclaims the equality of all human beings and denies that birth and belonging to a social group grant rights and privileges. From this point of view Buddhism meant a “revolution” in the Indian society of the 6th century of the Common Era, revolution deprived of any violence, that tried to transform society in ancient India.

Buddha’s conception of society and His rejection of the castes system is in absolute congruency with His attitude of universalistic inclusivism (not to leave anyone outside) and generosity (not to keep for oneself the riches of any nature). And Buddha’s conception of society is also of an extraordinary actuality as so many of His Teachings that with the lapse of centuries have not lost their wisdom and capacity to benefit people. Today in a great number of countries it is still birth that determines the destiny of persons. There a boy, or a girl, born in a poor family has scanty possibilities to avoid a life of poverty and suffering. Birth marks them for ever. Unfortunately in this world there is no a generalized Buddhist social feeling against the limitations imposed by birth neither the firm will to resort to the only means to put an end to these limitations: education. Only education can guarantee that the tyranny of birth be replaced by the just government – as the Buddha aspired to – of Knowledge and Moral values.

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cldragon@mail.retina.ar

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56 It can be considered that in India the three great epochs of conversion from Hinduism into Buddhism were: the period in which Shakyamuni personally preached the Dharma (6th century before the Common Era), the reign of the Great Buddhist Emperor Aśoka (governed 272-236 before the Common Era), and in modern time (20th century) when took place the social movement under the leadership of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). Dr. Ambedkar was, in the Hindu social system of castes, a member of a low caste (outcast, untouchable, dalit, Harijans or “people of God” as Gandhi called them); he became a prestigious politician that firstly collaborated with Gandhi in the process of emancipation, and afterwards, because of their opposed positions concerning the caste system, he abandoned Gandhi’s cause and promoted then a massive conversion of Hindu people to Buddhism considering it was the only way for Indian low classes to be liberated from the extreme misery and suffering of the caste system. Cf. R.C. Prasad, Ambedkarism, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993; Anne M. Blackburn, “Religion, Kinship and Buddhism: Ambedkar’s Vision of a Moral Community”, in The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, 1993, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 1-23; Sangharakshita, Ambedkar and Buddhism, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006; Sridhar Tripathi, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Indian Dalit, New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt.Ltd., 2007.

57 To this subject we have dedicated our contribution in the Panel of Joseph Logan: “Recovering Anew the Lotus Sutra’s Originality as a Religio-Philosophical System”, in the XVth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, held at Emory University, in Atlanta, U.S.A. (Jun.28, 2008). See Kokoro, Special Issue 2009.