

Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism – A Reappraisal

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There already exists a long list of writings on the topic of this paper – a topic which still holds out the promise of being fertile. Shunning abstract metaphysical speculations, Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism appear to be close to experience, ordinary as well as the extra-ordinary. They appear to be interested in describing elements and configurations of experience in minutest details. Nevertheless, it is a generally acknowledged fact that a great man very often represents his age and is a product of his age. From this perspective it will not be out of place to view the Advaitins', especially of the forerunners of Advaita Vedānta – Gaudapāda and Śankara, philosophical background, to know the trend and significance of their philosophies in order to appreciate them in their proper perspectives. In this paper, I would like to reexamine the possible relationship that might exist between Advaita Vedānta (of Gaudapāda and Śankara) and Buddhism in general in order to understand their epistemological and metaphysical position in a proper perspective. It is always possible that Vedānta and Buddhism were not isolated phenomena that ruled out any interaction between the two. With this in mind, I will summarize observations made by some scholars on the relation between Buddhism and Vedānta.

Gaudapāda and Buddhism

The earliest known Vedānta philosopher who reconciled authority with logic and established Non-dualism on a rational basis is Gaudapāda. His Māṇḍukya Kārikā (an elaborate versified exposition of the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad) is the first available

systematic presentation of the cardinal truths of Advaita philosophy. Gaudapāda's age was surcharged with Buddhism. Buddhism was politically respected, favoured by scholars, and dogmatically accepted by the common man. Buddhism was in the air itself. By this time the Lankāvatāra was an already established fact. Nāgārjuna, Asanga and Vasubandhu held complete sway over the minds of intellectuals, and it was almost impossible to escape their influence. Some scholars even suggest that there is sufficient evidence in the Gaudapāda Kārikā for thinking that Gaudapāda was himself a Buddhist, and considered that the teaching of the Upaniṣads tallied with those of the Buddha. It would not be extraordinary with this background in view if Gaudapāda was a Buddhist or had assimilated Buddhism, or had tried to interpret the Vedānta on Buddhist lines. Although Śankara, the grand student of Gaudapāda, is regarded as the founder of the non-dualistic Vedānta, which developed mainly through his commentary on Bādarāyaṇa's Vedānta aphorisms, the line of thought is at least as old as the *Upaniṣads* themselves. A few centuries before Śankara, the Vijñānavāda and the Mādhyamika Buddhists began calling their ultimate reality non-dual (*advaya*). The *Prajñāpāramita* literature, which is perhaps earlier than the birth of Christ, repeatedly uses the word non-dual. Bhartṛhari (6th century A.D.), the author of *Vākyapadīya* which is perhaps the first great work on the deeper philosophical basis of grammar, developed his philosophy along non-dualistic lines. It is said that he became a Buddhist before he became again a Vedāntin. About the same time, Gaudapāda, the grand teacher of Śankara, wrote his Māṇḍukya-Kārikās and used a language very reminiscent of Vijñānavāda Buddhism, and even incorporated some of its ideas. The logical significance of *Māyā* was already clarified by Buddhism in terms of the four-cornered negation.¹ Gaudapāda and after him the whole Advaita tradition

incorporated it. Nāgārjuna maintained that, from the ultimate point of view, the world is neither born, nor exists, nor disappears (ajātivāda). Gaudapāda agrees with the Vijñānavādins in maintaining that the world is ultimately unreal, for it cannot exist independently always and outside of Consciousness which is the only Reality. It is unreal also because the relations which constitute it are all unreal. Even Śankara says that Gaudapāda accepts the arguments of the *Vijñānavādins* to prove the unreality of the external objects.² Gaudapāda incorporated it into Vedānta developed it out of the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad. The forms of the world are like hallucinations, due to the principle of the Unconsciousness (*Avidyā* or Ignorance). They are forms of mere flux appearing as Being, like the circle of fire that appears when a firebrand is moved in a circle with great speed. All such ideas are Buddhist, the only difference being that they have no ontological basis at least for the Mādhyamika Buddhism, while they are all rooted in the Being of the *Brahman* for Gaudapāda.³ However, he had a great respect for the Buddha whom he considered as the “Greatest of Men”. But Gaudapāda did not develop his ideas further, and the only work left by him seems to be his *Māṇḍukya Kārikās*. The task of developing the system, of entering into controversies with other religious and philosophical schools, and of commenting on the three basic works of the Vedānta – the *Upaniṣads*, the *Vedānta Sūtras*, and the *Bhagavadgīta* – were left to Śankara.⁴

The Absolute of Gaudapāda appears to be a highly abstract and negative entity when compared with that of Śankara. Ś. Radhakrishnan observes, ‘We need not say that the Advaita Vedānta Philosophy has been very much influenced by the Mādhyamika doctrine. The *Ālataśānti* of Gaudapāda’s *Kārikās* is full of Mādhyamika tenets. The Advaitic distinction of *Vyavahāra* or experience and *paramārtha* or reality, correspond to the *samvṛti*

and the *paramārtha* of the Mādhyamikas. The *Nirguṇa Brahman* of Śankara and Nāgārjuna's Śūnya has much in common. The force of *avidyā* introducing the phenomenal universe is admitted by both. The keen logic of abstractions, categories and relations appears in both.⁵ Śankara characterizes Gaudapāda as "one who knows the tradition" in his *Bhāṣya* on the *Brahmasūtras*. It follows that he endorses the views of Gaudapāda as expressed in the *Kārikā*, which means that he is secretly in sympathy with the Buddhist, particularly the Mādhyamika, teachings.⁶ Most of the post-Śankarites, following Śankara but probably missing his intention, condemned Śūnyavāda as utter nihilism and Vijñānavāda in the sense of momentary *Vijñānas*. However, among the post-Śankarites, Śriharṣa tried to revive the long-lost spirit of Gaudapāda and who correctly represented Śūnyavāda and frankly admitted the enormous similarities between Śūnyavāda and Advaita.⁷ The advance made by Śankara and his followers on Śūnyavāda and Gaudapāda consists in the development of the view that *Avidyā* or *Māyā* is a positive material stuff of 'Ignorance' which baffles all descriptions.⁸

Prof. Chandradhar Sharma points out that those who dub Gaudapāda as a crypto-Buddhist tend to suggest that he had a definite leaning towards Buddhism and only outwardly professed to be a Vedāntin. If one is really fond of this 'Pracchanna' – terminology, then instead of dubbing Gaudapāda as a *Pracchanna – Bauddha*, it will be far more appropriate for one to dub the Śūnyavadins and the Vijñānavādins as *Pracchanna-Vedantins*.⁹ The uniqueness of the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad is that it is the first *Upaniṣad* that articulates the fourth state, the *Turīya*, beyond the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads* did not recognize the fourth state though they talked of the self in deep sleep as the ultimate seer which has resemblance to the *Turīya* state of the *Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad*. But

the *Turīya* state is an ultimate release of the triple state of waking, dreaming, dreamless, not intentional, free from subject-object duality in *Māṇḍukya*'s position.

We have seen that with Gaudapāda the *Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad* and its fourth state of *Turīya* attained great significance which is also similar to pure subjectivity on the state of 'suchness', the state of the self as it is 'pure consciousness', is the Sun, Self-luminous. It is obvious that Gaudapāda was much influenced by Buddhist epistemology as the language of his *Kārikā* is a reminiscent of Vijñānavāda. Although Gaudapāda utilized some arguments from Buddhist authors he distanced himself from Buddhism and remained a Vedāntin. Again P.T. Raju says that "if there is a *svabhāva*, the world would be devoid of diverse states, it will be unborn, without cessation, immutable" that if something does not have an intrinsic nature it cannot become different. He also accepts the consequences that follows from Nāgārjuna's view. But Gaudapāda differs from Nāgārjuna in this point that there is one thing that has *svabhāva*, that is Reality (*Sat*) that is unborn, the *Brahman-Ātman*. Thus, we find that despite the fact that Gaudapāda incorporated many Buddhist elements into his thought his ultimate position is that of a Vedāntin than of a Buddhist. On the basis of the above discussion, I will now attempt to explore if the special relation between Śankara and Gaudapāda is indicative of more Buddhist influence on Śankara through his revered Guru Gaudapāda.

Śankara and Buddhism

Every great thinker tends to draw upon the experiential and speculative materials collected and presented by preceding investigators and thinkers. Śankara was no exception to this rule. Consciously or unconsciously he accomplished in his

system a synthesis of the most significant and intensely realized elements in the thoughts and teachings of his predecessors. Śankara was fully acquainted with the *Vedic* tradition of thought, including the great *Upaniṣads* on the one hand and the *Dharmaśāstras* and the Mīmāṃsā system on the other. He was also cognizant of the pre-eminent position occupied by the Sāṃkhya and Yoga systems of philosophy. Nor was he unaware of the influence that the idealistic systems of the Buddhists had come to wield over a section of the intelligentsia. Śankara absorbed and assimilated in the orthodox view the elements of the Sāṃkhya - Yoga and Buddhist systems which were calculated to enrich his view.¹⁰ Some critics (like Vijñānabhikṣu) suggest that Śankara has imported the concept of *Māyā* from Buddhism, since it is powerfully reminiscent of the Mādhyamika Śūnyavāda (*sarvam Śūnyam*), especially of the statement of Nāgārjuna, in his *Mulamādhyamika Kārikā*, that when we begin to reflect on things they give way and dissolve. Hence Śankara is charged by some of his uncharitable critics being a Buddhist in disguise (*Pracchanna-bauddha*).¹¹ In his *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya*, Śankara criticizes practically all the well-known Schools of Buddhism, including the Vijñānavāda, and expresses his contempt to the Śūnyavāda School.¹² As this needs further elaboration, I will make an attempt at understanding this dimension in the following manner.

Śankara and Vijñānavāda

In the *Upaniṣads* Brahman has been identified with *jñāna*, *vijñāna* or knowledge; Brahman is also described as being of the nature of consciousness.¹³ This seems to give rise to a fundamental similarity between Advaita Vedānta and Vijñānavāda. However, the similarity or resemblance touches only the surface of the two

doctrines. The *Brahman* of the Advaita is essentially changeless and without quality, while change is the very essence of the continuum of the *Vijñānas* (*Vijñāna-Santāna*). This basic difference, indeed, sharply divides the Buddhist systems from the different Hindu philosophies, particularly in their conceptions regarding the essential nature of the Self. Secondly, the Hindu philosophers, including the Vedāntin, do not seek to deny the existence of the external world. Even the Advaita Vedānta has to concede the existence of the external world, though it is not prepared to believe that whatever exists is real.¹⁴ Following is a brief discussion portraying the views of Śankara against the idea of momentariness of the Vijñānavādins.

The Vijñānavādin is a subjective idealist who believes that only separate, momentary ideas (*vijñāna*) or cognitions are real, and that there is no external world. One argument offered by the Vijñānavādin, while viewing against the existence of the external world, is that because the cognition of an object always occurs simultaneously with the act of cognition, the object is identical with the cognition itself. Another of their arguments is based on the analogy of dreams and illusions, wherein experience takes place without dependence on the external world.¹⁵ Śankara relinquishes these arguments by counter-arguing that common sense and conventional logic both presuppose the existence of the subject and the external world, and that true spiritual experience involves the transcendence of the empirical subject in addition¹⁶ to the cancellation of the objective world. The Vijñānavādins, however, seem to point to a very important phenomenological fact, that is, to the primacy of the subject or consciousness in experience. This, along with the *Buddhist* traditional theories of impermanence (*anitya*) and no Self (*Anātman*), resulted in the Vijñānavādin's denial of the reality of mental substance or a continuous self.

Instead, these thinkers posited the existence of an infinite number of individual streams or series (*samtāna*) of ideas. Now the problem arises, how is it possible for a theory which admits only the reality of momentary, subjective ideas to explain the coherence of empirical experience (the possibility of correspondence between our ideas and external objects having already been denied)? The *Vijñānavādins* explain that our cognitions cohere because they are caused by impressions (*vāsanā*) left behind from previous experience.

Śankara objects to this theory by claiming that this explanation is circular, that is, cognitions are caused by impressions which are themselves caused by cognitions, and that it leads to an infinite regress.¹⁷ But the *Vijñānavādins* reply that an infinite regress does not undermine their position since each series of cognition, like *samsāra* (the world) itself, is beginningless. Here, Śankara raises a more fundamental question asking – where does this continuity of impressions reside? For, he argues (by assuming the validity of the *svabhāva* principle once again) that the experiences of personal identity and memory presuppose a continuous principle of consciousness¹⁸ and further dismisses it by asking how any kind of continuity, whether it is required to explain the existence of a substratum of impressions or the experiences of personal identity and memory be incorporated into an analysis of consciousness based on a doctrine of momentariness?¹⁹

Śankara, however, undoubtedly owed his emphasis on the unreality of the world to the influence of the Mahāyāna philosophers, but he did not find it possible to accept their pronouncedly negative conceptions of the Absolute. Not only was his *Brahman* absolutely without change or eternal, to be sharply distinguished from the *ālaya* and the *Vijñāpti-matratā* of the

Vijñānavādins; it was also characterized by blissful consciousness.²⁰ Śankara in a sense admits Vijñānavāda. But he wants to prove the unreality of the external world not by saying that it does not fall outside of consciousness, but by saying that it is essentially indescribable as existent or as non-existent (*sadasadanirvacanīya*). This view, however, was developed in Śūnyavāda and accepted by Gaudapāda.

Śankara and Mādhyamikas

It has been suggested by some that the founder of the Advaita Vedānta failed to grasp the significance of Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the *Śūnya*, which greatly resembled his own *Brahman*. Although Śankara calls his *Brahman nirguṇa*, it has little or nothing in common with the Absolute of Nāgārjuna. Śankara's *Brahman* further differs from the Absolute of Nāgārjuna in being identical with the self and thus a datum of direct experience. The *nirvāṇa* and the *Tathatā* (or suchness) which are declared to be wholly beyond speech cannot be compared with the Vedāntic *Brahman* which is identical with our inmost self. Further, Śankara's conception of *Ātman* as pure awareness has far reaching consequences for his theory of knowledge. This conception is derived from the *Upaniṣads* and has affinities with the Sāṃkhya conception of the Puruṣa; it has absolutely nothing in common with the Śūnya of the Mādhyamikas.²¹

The resemblance of Śankara's doctrine to Nāgārjuna's is confined to only two important tenets, namely, the theory of twofold truth and the belief in the phenomenal character of the world. The second tenet involves an attitude of rejection or negation towards life in this world. According to Mādhyamika the entities of the world lack self-nature or self-essence because they are all infested with relativity; according to Śankara they are devoid of a constant

nature or enduring essence. According to him, however, they derive from a reality which has a fixed nature.²² However, Śankara's reasons regarding the world as an appearance are very different from those advanced by Nāgārjuna. The criteria of reality and unreality proposed by Śankara are, in the last analysis, experiential and not logical, while in Nāgārjuna (and Bradley) they are certainly logical.²³

Regarding Śankara's relation to Buddhism one must acknowledge that there were much Buddhist influences on Śankara's thought, though like Gaudapāda, Śankara's ultimate position is that of a Vedāntin which has its doctrine of *Sat* and *Ātman* (permanence) against Buddhist doctrines of momentariness, a fact which made Śankara also a critic of Buddhism. But Śankara was respectful of the other elements of Buddhist thought which were similar to his Vedāntic ideals. Radhakrishnan observes: "There are no doubt similarities between the views of Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta, and this is not surprising in view of the fact that both these systems had for their background the *Upaniṣads*" (S. Radhakrishnan, p. 472). As we know that Buddha considered his role as a reformulator than one destroys tradition, and he developed many ideas which had a common *Upaniṣadīc* base to both Buddhism and Vedānta. Śankara's *Māyā* is akin to phenomenalism of Buddhism. The in-between position of the world (phenomenal reality) as both to the middle position of Buddha as a process of 'becoming', neither Being nor Non-Being, the two levels of truth, *mokṣa-nirvāṇa* similarities etc., opposition to exclusiveness of *Vedic* ritualism, are similar but there are some important differences between Śankara and Buddhism regarding the nature of the object of illusion. Differing from the Mahāyāna (Nāgārjuna) view that for whom the basis of the illusory object is void (*Śūnya*), Śankara fears that this would cut the very root

of truth-falsity dichotomy. For Śankara falsity (*Māyā*) is founded on truth and he rejects the Vijñānavāda view that the real basis of illusion is pure consciousness or void. In that case pure consciousness or void will be the ground of both truth and falsity. For Śankara and for Advaita Vedānta though both are based on *Brahman* one can ask, "How and where do we get the ideas of truth and falsity?" We get these ideas from empirical reality; an empirically true object forms the basis of a false object. For Vedānta, the illusory snake is a self-contradicted percept; it is based on *Sat* (deeper) non-conceptual indeterminate Being. Thus, we find that Śankara's perspective is of a Vedāntin who is also inspired by logic and philosophy of Buddhist scholars.

It may be concluded that Advaita Vedānta as presented by Gaudapāda and Śankara and Mahāyāna Buddhism as represented in the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna are so similar to one another, and the difference between them so little and unimportant that one cannot but feel that the Advaita Vedānta is indebted to Mahāyāna Buddhism, as it comes first in order of time. Advaita Vedānta seems to be an attempt on the part of Gaudapāda and Śankara, to reconcile the two currents of thought, Buddhist and Upaniṣadic.

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