



A Study of the Vedic source of Buddhist Philosophical Principles

Dr. Thakur Shivlochan Shandilya

Assistant Professor
Department of Sanskrit
BHU, Varanasi, India

shivlochan.sans@bhu.ac.in / shandilya.jnu@gmail.com

Abstract : The study explores the philosophical connections between Vedic literature and Buddhist principles, arguing that many core concepts in Buddhist philosophy are rooted in Vedic teachings. While Buddhism is often regarded as an atheistic philosophy that diverges from Vedic traditions, a closer examination reveals that foundational Buddhist ideas such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the theory of causation (Pratityasamutpada) bear significant resemblance to the teachings found in the Vedic texts. This paper highlights the influence of Vedic sources like the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and various sutras on Buddhist doctrines, showing that despite differences in practice and interpretation, both traditions share common philosophical ground. The study delves into key Buddhist principles—such as Dukha, the cessation of suffering, and reincarnation—and traces their origins to Vedic thought. By examining these links, the paper underscores the philosophical interconnectedness between the two traditions and suggests that understanding these shared roots can promote harmony and co-existence between Buddhism and Sanatan Vedic traditions.

Keywords:- Buddhist philosophy, Vedic influence, Four Noble Truths, Pratityasamutpada, Upanishads, Vedic literature

Copyright © 2024 Dr. Thakur Shivlochan Sandilya This is an open-access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution Licence, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium provided the original work is

Many traditions of knowledge and science have developed in India since ancient times, in which the tradition of philosophy is also very ancient and rich and has emerged very strong over time. Generally, the meaning of the word *Darshana* is that through which one can show "*Drishyate Anen Iti Darshanam*" i.e. the knowledge system which illuminates the deep secrets of life on the basis of logic and thought, it is called philosophy. On discussing about Indian philosophy, it is known that many philosophical schools were developed on the soil of India, but generally Indian philosophies are divided into two parts, theistic philosophy (Vedic based) and atheistic philosophy (Non-Vedic philosophies). Among the *Astika* (theistic) philosophies are Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Purvamimamsa and Uttarmimamsa (Vedanta) and the *Nastika* (atheistic) philosophies include Buddhist, Jain and Charvaka philosophies.

It is an undisputed fact that atheistic philosophies had a deep impact on the Indian society and gained fame as the favourite philosophies of the people. Buddhist philosophy has its own special place among atheistic philosophies. The religious teachings given by Buddha later developed into Buddhist philosophy and were established as a new philosophy. There were many Acharyas in this sect who established many traditions based on the teachings of Mahatma Buddha. Buddha's birth is considered to be in the 6th century BC. In his sermons, Buddha propounded the subjects of Four Noble Truths, *Pratityasamutpada*, *Panchsheel*, *Anatmavada*, *Anishwarvada* etc.

The period of rise and spread of Buddhist Philosophy has remarkable importance in the history of Indian Philosophy. Vedic Philosophy has been prevalent in India since ancient times and the richness of Indian scripture-tradition is well known. But the period, in which Buddhist Philosophy emerged, was a period of transition; various

social evils had come into vogue in the name of religion due to different interpretations of Vedic rituals. Irregularity was spreading everywhere in the society, Vedic values were getting eroded. In that period, due to the good teachings of *Mahatma Buddha* and being influenced by the simplicity of Buddhism, the common people got inclined towards Buddhism.

The presented article is an exploratory study of Buddhist philosophical principles and Vedic literary sources. In fact, all the philosophies of Indian origin are related to the Vedas to some extent, even if they appear to be atheistic. In this article, evidence is being presented in favour of this study that the principles propounded in Buddhist philosophy have their basis in Vedic literature. By studying the Vedic texts like *Bhagavad Gita*, *Upanishads*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* etc., it is known that the source of the principles propounded in Buddhist philosophy is the *Sanatani* Vedic literature itself.

❖ Four Noble Truths and their Vedic Sources

The Four Noble Truths are one of the fundamental principles of Buddhist philosophy. Mahatma Buddha preached four truths to his disciples to explain the deep secrets of life and these are the following *Arya* (noble) truths.

i) **Dukha** – *Dukha* (suffering) is the first noble truth which means that the entire world is full of sorrow. Birth and death, aging, grief, separation from beloved, unpleasant coincidences, all sorrows are sufferings.

ii) **Dukha-samudaya** – *Dukha-samudaya* is the second noble truth. *Samudaya* means cause; hence *Dukha Samudaya* means the cause of sorrow. The cause of sorrow is *Trishna* (craving).

iii) **Dukha-nirodha** – *Dukha-nirodha* (Cessation of sorrow) is the third noble truth. *Nirodha* means renunciation or destruction. This truth shows that suffering or sorrow can be destroyed.

iv) **Dukha-nirodha-marg** - The path is the fourth noble truth, which means the path that leads to cessation of suffering. If there is a destination, then there must be a path to it. Therefore, the destination of every living being is *Nirvana* and there is the path for it. This path is named as the *Arya Ashtangika Marga* (The eightfold noble path) in Buddhism.

Thus, these four noble truths have an important place in the basic principles of Buddha. This teaching of Lord Buddha is very much similar to the revelations of many Vedic *Rishis* (sages) who have preached all these facts in the ancient Vedic philosophies.

The commentator sage *Vyasa* says in the *Bhashya* of the fifteenth *sutra* of the second part of the *Yoga-Sutra* composed by *Maharshi Patanjali* - “परिणामतापसंस्कारदुःखैर्गुणवृत्तिविरोधाच्च दुःखमेव सर्वं विवेकिनः”ⁱ

“यथा चिकित्साशास्त्रं चतुर्व्यहम् - रोगो रोगहेतुरारोग्यं भैषज्यमिति । एवमिदमपि शास्त्रं चतुर्व्यहमेव । तद्यथा संसारः संसारहेतुर्मोक्षो मोक्षोपाय इति । तत्र दुःखबहुलः संसारो हेयः ।”ⁱⁱ

That is, just as medical science has four divisions (*vyuh*)- disease, cause of disease, cure of disease and the method of treatment of the disease; similarly this *Yoga Shastra* also has four divisions- *Samsara*, cause of *Samsara*, salvation and ways of salvation. Here *Samsara* means abundance of sorrow, therefore the *Yogins* aspire for salvation from it.

• Chaturvyuh Yogashastra

Samsara – Sorrow.

Samsarahetu - Cause of sorrow

Moksha – Cessation of suffering

Mokshopaya – Remedy for relief from suffering

Dukha or Sorrow has also been discussed in the *Sankhya Shastra* and there is a detailed description of the measures to get relief from sorrow. *Dukhatraya* has been described in the first part of *Sakhyakarika* which is as follows.

“दुःखत्रयाभिघाताज्जिज्ञासा तदपघातके हेतौ ।

दृष्टे साऽपार्था चेन्नैकान्ताऽत्यन्ततोऽभावात् ॥”ⁱⁱⁱ

That is, when sorrow comes in life, there is a desire to know the reason for its relief. Here the three types of sorrows, spiritual, metaphysical and spiritual, are discussed in *Dukhatraya*.

The root cause of sorrow is *Avidya* or ignorance. All philosophies unanimously consider ignorance as the cause of all suffering. It is said in mantra 11 of the *Ishavasyopanishad*-

“विद्यां चाविद्यां च यस्तद्वेदोभयं सह ।

अविद्यया मृत्युं तीर्ता विद्ययामृतमश्नुते ॥”^{iv}

That is, the person who simultaneously knows the elements of Vidya (knowledge) and Avidya (actions) simultaneously, transcends death through the ritual of actions and attains immortality through the ritual of Vidya (knowledge).

In this way, the description of the sad nature of the mortal world is clearly seen in the Vedic literature along with its causes and the remedies for eliminating sorrow, which makes it clear that the root of *The Four Noble Truths* are innately latent in the Vedic texts.

❖ Noble Eightfold Path and its Vedic Sources:-

The Eightfold Path is the ultimate practice of the ethics of Buddhism. This path that destroys suffering has the following eight parts.

- i) सम्यक् दृष्टि
- ii) सम्यक् संकल्प
- iii) सम्यक् वाक्
- iv) सम्यक् कर्मान्त
- v) सम्यक् आजीविका
- vi) सम्यक् व्यायाम
- vii) सम्यक् स्मृति
- viii) सम्यक् समाधि

Just as the eight parts of the path to cessation of suffering have been presented in Buddhist philosophy, in fact, since ancient times, Vedic sages have preached such teachings to their disciples. Right actions have been preached in the eleventh chapter of *Shikshavalli* of *Taittiriya Upanishad* :-

“सत्यं वद । धर्मं चर । स्वाध्यायान्मा प्रमदः ।... सत्यान्नं प्रमदितव्यम् । धर्मान्नं प्रमदितव्यम् । यानि अनवद्यानि कर्माणि । तानि सेवितव्यानि । नो इतराणि” ।ⁱ

Ten characteristics of Dharma (good conduct) have been described in the *Manusmriti*.

“धृतिः क्षमा दमोस्तेयं शौचमिन्द्रियनियहः
धीर्विद्या सत्यमक्रोधो दशक धर्मलक्षणम्” ॥ⁱⁱ

In the sixth chapter of the *BhagavadGita*, the self has been said to be the one who can save oneself.

उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् ।
आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ॥^{vii}

In the above *mantra* of *ShrimadbhagwadGita* the preacher *Bhagvan Shri Krishna* teaches his disciple *Arjuna* to elevate himself by his own self and forbids him to downgrade his own self. As the man himself is his own friend he himself is his enemy. The famous quote of *Mahatma Buddha* to his disciple *Bhante Ananda* “Be your own light” signifies the same teaching.

Thus, through exploratory study, it is known that the basic source of the eightfold path of Buddhist philosophy is the Vedic literature, which Buddha might have developed in his own way.

❖ Causation theory of Buddhism: Pratityasamutpada and its Vedic sources

The principle of cause and effect means that an action occurs when there is a cause, that is, every action has a reason. This principle is explained in the form of *Sankhyadarshan Satkaryavada* and *Nyayadarshan Asatkaryavada*, but the basic principle is the same. Not only Indian philosophy but also Western philosophy accepts this principle. Buddhism also accepted this principle of causation and explained it as 'Pratityasamutpada'. Which means-

“अस्मिन् सति इदं भवति, अस्योत्पादादयमुत्पद्यते इति इदं प्रत्ययार्थः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादार्थः” ।^{viii}

That is, when this thing (cause) exists, that thing (effect) happens, when one thing exists, another thing arises. This cause and effect theory of Buddhist philosophy is originally professed in the Vedic texts; it is certainly possible that Buddhist philosophers developed it as per their own ethical and textual establishments, but the original source is somewhere in the Vedic literature.

Satkaryavada has been accepted as the cause and effect theory in Vedic *Sankhya* philosophy. It has been presented in the following form in the *Sarankhyakarika* of *Ishwar Krishna*:-

असदकरणादुपादानग्रहणात् सर्वसम्भवाभावात् ।
शक्तस्य शक्यकरणात् कारणभावाच्च सत्कार्यम् ॥^{ix}

Sankhya Darshana does not consider any work or effect as a new origin, but it believes that the effect is already present in its cause that is why the *Sat* comes from the *Sat*, the origin of the *Sat* from the *Asat* is never possible.

Similarly, philosophies like *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Mimamsa* etc. also believe in the principle of cause and effect. *Acharya Keshav Mishra*, while characterizing the *Kaarana* or cause according to the *Nyaya Darshana* writes in his text *Tarkabhasha* -

"यस्य कार्यात् पूर्वभावो नियतोऽनन्यथासिद्धश्च तत्कारणम् । यथा तन्तुवमादिकं पदस्य कारणम् ।" ^x

Similarly, in the first mantra of the first chapter of the *Shwetashvatara Upanishad*, there is an example of the principle of causality in which some aspirants are discussing the cause of the world:-

"किं कारणं ब्रह्म कुतः स्म जाता जीवाम केन क्व च सम्प्रतिष्ठाः अधिष्ठिताः केन सुखे तरेषु वर्तामहे ब्रह्मविदो व्यवस्थाम्" ^{xi}

That is, the seekers who know the Supreme *Parabrahma* say among themselves, O great sages who know the Vedas! We have read in the Vedas that Brahman is the cause of the entire universe; so, who is that Brahman? From whom did we all originate? What is our origin? Through whose influence we are living, who is the basis of our life, etc., it is known that the world is an effect and Brahman is its cause.

Many such examples are found in Vedic literature which reinforces the theory of cause and effect. In *Bhagavad Gita* too, such examples related to cause and effect are found at many places. While describing the state of wisdom in the second chapter of *Sankhyayoga*, *Shri Krishna* says to *Arjuna*-

"ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गास्तेषूपजायते ।
सङ्गात्सञ्जायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥
क्रोधाद्भवति सम्मोहः सम्मोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः ।
स्मृतिभ्रंशाद् बुद्धिनाशो बुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति" ^{xii}

That is, a person who thinks about worldly subjects gets attached to those subjects, attachment causes desire for those subjects, obstruction in desire causes anger, anger causes extreme foolishness, foolishness causes confusion in memory and confusion of memory leads to destruction of intelligence and due to loss of intellect that person falls from his mighty position. Thus, the attachment to the mortal worldly subjects is the root cause of downfall or destruction.

Such lucid and vivid examples of the cause and effect theory can be seen numerous in the the Vedic and Upanishadic literature.

❖ Theory of Reincarnation and its Vedic sources

The theory of reincarnation is very famous in Indian philosophy. Buddhist philosophy also believes in the principle of rebirth that according to the kind of work a living being does, he takes a new birth. Since the Buddhist philosophy does not accept the eternity of a permanent *Nitya Atman*, hence regarding rebirth it believes in the flow of *Vijnana* and *Vasana* (desires). In this context, the principle of dependent arising *Pratityasamutpada* is prevalent in Buddhist philosophy, under which there is discussion of 12 *Nidanas* which are causal to each other, it is called *Bhavachakra* or the *Sansara*,

'Bhavachakra' is as follows –

भवचक्र	
१- अविद्या	७- वेदना
२- संस्कार	८- तृष्णा
३- विज्ञान	९- उपादान
४- नामरूप	१०- भव
५- षडायतन	११- जाति
६- स्पर्श	१२- जरा

Buddhist philosophy developed the theory of rebirth in its own way, but we can observe its basic theory in the Vedic philosophy also. Theories related to rebirth have been presented at many places in Vedic literature. The topic related to rebirth is found at many places in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In the fourth chapter of *Gita*, *Shri Krishna* says

बहूनि मे व्यतीतानि जन्मानि तव चार्जुन ।

तान्यहं वेद सर्वाणि न त्वं वेत्थ परन्तप ॥ ^{xiii}

That is, O great Arjun. You and I have had many births. You don't know them all, but I do.

Rebirth has also been discussed in the 15th verse of the Eighth Chapter -

मामुपेत्य पुनर्जन्म दुःखालयम शाश्वतम् ।
नाप्नुवन्ति महात्मानः संसिद्धिं परमां गताः ॥^{xiv}

That is, Shri Krishna says - O Arjun, the great man who has attained supreme success does not attain the abode of sorrows and ephemeral rebirth after attaining me.

The discussion of *Brahmachakra* related to rebirth is also found in the Shvetashvatar Upanishad:-

सर्वाजीवे सर्वसंस्थे बृहन्ते अस्मिन् हंसो भ्राम्यते ब्रह्मचक्रे ।
पृथगात्मानं प्रेरितारं च मत्वा जुष्टस्ततस्तेनामृतत्वमेति ॥^{xv}

That is, this *Jivatman* (living being) is rotated by that *Paramatman* according to its deeds in this world cycle which is, in fact, the huge body of that *Paramatman* and this cycle is operated by the *Parabrahman* himself.

In Nyaya philosophy too, the topic of rebirth is discussed in the 19th *sutra* of the first part of the first chapter of the *Nyaya Sutra*, “पुनरुत्पत्तिः प्रेत्यभावः”^{xvi} In the commentary of this *sutra*, Acharya Vatsyayan writes, “पुनरुत्पत्तिः पुनर्देहादिभिः सम्बन्धः”^{xvii}. *Pretyabhaav* is the process of death and rebirth.

In the *Markandeya Purana*, there is a conversation between the deity *Durga Devi* and the king in which the *Devi* blesses the king to be born from a part of the deity *Surya* in the next birth and to be known as *Savarnik Manu* on earth :-

मृतश्च भूयः सम्प्राप्य जन्म देवाद्विवस्वतः। सार्वर्णको नाम मनुर्भवात् भुवि भविष्यति ॥^{xviii}

In the fourteenth chapter of the *Nirukta*, rebirth has been described in the context of upward movement. Which is as follows-

मृतश्चाहं पुनर्जातो जातश्चाहं पुनर्मृतः।
नानायोनी सहस्राणि मयोषितानि यानि वै ॥
आहारा विविधा भुक्ताः पीता नानाविधाः स्तनाः।
मातरो विविधा दृष्टाः पितरः सुहृदस्तथा ॥^{xix}

That is, I died several times and then took birth several times and lived in many different forms. Saw many mothers and fathers and friends.

In this way, the principle of rebirth is found in many places in the Vedic literature. Thus, from the study of many Vedic texts, it is known that the fundamental principle of rebirth is the Vedic principle.

❖ Anatmavada and Anishwaravada

Buddhist philosophy is believed to be an *Anatmavadin* and *Anishwarvadin* philosophy, as it does not completely accept the existence of an eternal *Atman* (soul) and any divine world-creator *Ishwara* (God). It is, however, true that *Anatmavada* and *Anishwarvada* have not been accepted in the Vedic literature, but both of them have been presented as *Purvapaksha* (antagonism), that is, there were some sects in the 'Vedic tradition' which did not accept the existence of God and the soul.

In Indian Vedic philosophy, both the philosophies of *Sankhya* and *Purva Mimamsa* do not accept God as the creator of the universe. In the *sutra* “ईश्वरासिद्धेः”^{xx} of *Sankhya Darshan*, the direct accomplishment of God has been rejected. On the basis of this *sutra*, *Sankhya Darshan* is often labelled as atheistic philosophy.

In the belief of *Anatmavada*, the existence of the eternal and transcendental *Atman* is denied. In *Chhandogya Upanishad*, its form can also be seen as an antecedent in the dialogue between Shwetaketu and Uddalaka.

“कुतस्तु खलु सोम्यैवं स्यादिति होवाच कथमसतः सञ्जायतेति। सत्त्वेव सोम्येदमग्र आसीदेकमवद्वीतीयम्”^{xxi}

In this way, *Anatmavada* is also described in Vedic sources; the Vedic theory does not accept *Anatmavada* but definitely refutes it by presenting it as an antecedent.

In this way, by studying the Vedic texts and the principles of Buddhist philosophy, it becomes clear that the principles propounded in Buddhist philosophy have their origin in the Vedic tradition. It is true that Buddhist philosophy developed its own principles but it is evident that they were basically described in the Vedic texts much earlier than the

origin of the Buddhist tradition. There are many principles of Buddhist philosophy which are actually rooted in the Vedic tradition since the beginning, e.g. *Satya, Asteya, Aparigraha, Brahmacharya, Samnyasa, Ahinsa, Mairi, Karuna, Mudita, Upeksha, Prajna, Sheel, Samadhi, Tapasya, Karma Siddhanta etc.*

We can understand the secret behind this shadow of the Vedic thought process on the Buddhist philosophy, some of the reasons for which are:

1. Mahatma Buddha, the originator of Buddhist philosophy, left his home at the age of 29. This renunciation of the royal palace is famous by the name of 'Mahabhinishkraman'.

2. Siddhartha left his home and got engaged in the *Sadhana* of the absolute truth and reality. While traveling with his five associate *bhikshus*, he reached the solitude of Uruvela.

3. There, he started living in the guise of those sages who meditate on eternal truths. People here started to address him as '*Shakya Muni*'. This period is known as '*Arya Paryavekshana*'.

4. He learned meditation yoga from gurus like Aalaar Kalam and Uddakaramputra, who were the masters of Sankhya and Yoga philosophy.

5. Gautama Buddha learned the distinct form of meditation yoga called Akichananyayatana (Aroopasamapatti) from them.

6. Even after six years of severe penance, when he didn't attain complete internal satisfaction, he went from there to 'Gaya', where he stayed for a few time in Samadhi and when he opened his eyes, he had attained enlightenment. This time-period is called his *Sambodhikaal*. It was here that he received the knowledge of the four Noble Truths (*Aryasatya*).

It is clear from the above facts that Gautam has been influenced by the Vedic tradition. Even though his path and direction to gain the real knowledge appear different from that of the *Sanatana* Vedic sages, they are similar in the same way as two branches of a tree, even though they appear different, they are similar in terms of the same composition and origin, there is no difference between them, in the same way, the principles of Buddhist and Vedic philosophies are also very similar.

Buddhist philosophy may have rejected rituals or rejected Vedic principles, but it has taken the help of traditional sources to develop its philosophy. Be it the Four Noble Truths or the Eightfold Path or from reincarnation to the theory of causation, it has followed them all. There is no doubt that whatever philosophy develops on Indian soil is influenced by Indian Vedic principles. Therefore, the form of Vedic principles can be seen in Buddhist philosophy also. The source or origin of the beliefs of *Sanatani Hindus* and Buddhists is the same; therefore, on the basis of this ideological synchronization, there should be development of peace, harmony and co-existence between both these sects. It is also noteworthy that the area of propagation and dissemination of the Buddhist religion and philosophy has been very vast and wide, therefore ideological diversity is also very natural on the basis of regional diversity. But ultimately both these dharma share a common binding thread in their fundamental philosophical ideas.

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Yogasutra, 2.15
- ⁱⁱ Vyasa Bhashya on the Yogasutra, 2.15
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sankhyakarika, 1
- ^{iv} Ishavashyopanishad, 11
- ^v Taittiriyanopanishad, 11
- ^{vi} Manusmriti, 6.12
- ^{vii} Shrimadbhagavadgita, 6/5
- ^{viii} Madhyamikavritti
- ^{ix} Sankhyakarika, 9.
- ^x Tarkabhasha, Pramanapadarthanirupana
- ^{xi} Shwetashvataropanishad, 1.1
- ^{xii} Shrimadbhagavadgita, 2.62, 63.
- ^{xiii} *ibid*, 4.5
- ^{xiv} *ibid*, 8.15
- ^{xv} Shwetashvataropanishad, 1.6
- ^{xvi} Nyayasutra, 1.19
- ^{xvii} Nyaya Bhashya on Sutra 1.19.
- ^{xviii} Durgasaptashati, 13.20, 21, 22, 23
- ^{xix} Nirukta
- ^{xx} Sankhyasutra, 1.92
- ^{xxi} Chhandogyopanishad, 6.2.2