Aurobindo's Notion of Buddhism

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The aim of this paper is to show the Aurobindo's notion of Buddhism. This is done through investigating his work *The Life Divine* (hereafter abbreviated *LD*). His philosophy is commonly known as "Integral Philosophy". His broad range of vision shows his horizontal scale of integrality. He refers to Buddhism most frequently, but mostly briefly. In *LD* he refers to Buddhism by the name of Buddhism, the Buddha's teaching, Buddhist, Buddhist Nihilists, certain Buddhist schools and so on. This fact may suggest that he recognizes the diversity of the doctrines of Buddhism. But he does not distinguish *Mahāyāna* Buddhism from the original teachings of the Buddha. So we are haunted by the idea that there is some simplification in his understanding of Buddhism. His notion of Buddhism in *LD* can be arranged from three points of views i.e. Buddhist as Nihilist, Buddhist universal love toward all beings and Buddhist as *karmavādin*. Among these the most fundamental aspect of his understanding of Buddhism appears in the first point of view. His notion of "Nihilist" connects logically with the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, and in spite of nihilism the universal love overflows from the Buddha.

At the opening of *LD* he makes a general remark on Buddhism. He takes up "two Negations" which disturbed the integrality of the *Veda*, and which he tries to revive. The two Negations are the "materialist denial" and "the refusal of the ascetic". He includes science in the materialism which denies the Spirit and shatters the limitless potentialities of human race to be Supermen. But it is less effective, less enduring than the refusal of the ascetic. And Buddhism represents the doctrine of the refusal of ascetic.

The refusal, that is to say, of this world of duality of bondage and liberation is the reverse side of the desire for attainment of some ineffable

Nirvāṇa, *Vrindavan*, *Brahmaloka* or where all separate experiences are lost in the featureless unity of the indefinable Existence. According to him, Buddhism gives the ideal of the renunciation, the denial of the value of the physical life and the recoil from Matter to the Indian mind.

According to Aurobindo, the Buddhists deny not only the reality of cosmic existence but also the reality of the eternal Self and *Brahman* which he calls the Absolute, following the Indian tradition, as illusion constructed by mind. For him Buddhism is a radical theory of illusion. He says as follows.

...if they look with detachment at its happenings, to agree with the conclusion of the Buddhist Nihilists that this self is in fact nothing but a stream of idea and experience and mental action... a flow of experience and behind it Nihil : there is experience of Knowledge without a Knower, experience of being without an Existent ; there are simply a number of elements, parts of a flux without a real whole, which combine to create the illusion of a Knower and Knowledge and the Known, the illusion of an Existent and existence and the experience of existence. (*LD*, p. 512)

"they" in the quotation means "those who live in this surface Time-self and have not the habit of drawing back inward towards the immutable or the capacity of dwelling in it." According to him the theory of illusion does not solve the world problem. It is an escape, not a solution. It is clear that he indicates here the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*. Needless to say, his notion can not be applied to Buddha's original teachings and the *dharma*-system of *Theravāda*. "Nihil is the void, where there can be no potentialities". He points out *śūnya* by the word "Void". The meaning of *anātman* in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is *svabhāvena śūnyatā* i.e. *asvabhāvatā* as a matter of course. So his appellation "Nihilist" seems to be inadequate. He asserts the evolution of human consciousness from the mind to supermind. So the truth of a construction of the mind can not be comprehensible by the mind itself, surface Time Self. He understands the doctrine of *anātman* as a theory of surface-mind-level.

Aurobindo says in the above quotation "behind it Nihil". The appellation "Nihilist" is derived from it. The problem concerns the Absolute,

and it also concerns *Nirvāṇa*. He refers to Buddhist *Nirvāṇa* frequently. According to him, *Nirvāṇa* is the ideal of Buddhists, and it means "an extinction of the individual and the universal, a self-annulment in the Absolute". The Absolute is *Brahman*, the One besides whom there is nothing else existent. It is unexpressible and beyond thinking, but it is self-evident for us as our *ātman*. The doctrine of *anātman* according to his notion, as above-mentioned, leaves a problem unanswered.

Buddhism lifting up the ideal of *Nirvāṇa*, has no theory concerning the Absolute. And the lack of the theory is represented by the manifestation of *avyākṛta*, the Buddha's rejection of answering to metaphysical problems. Buddhists need not to explain "the hidden Reality". According to him, "what we call by the names "Nihil" and "Void" are simply terms beyond the grasp of our senses, our mind or our most subtle consciousness. They are only words like "Non-Being", fictions in order to overpass the world grasped by senses and intellect, conducted by the method of total exclusion. So he does not imply positive assertion by the word "Nihilist".

He acknowledges the rationality of the theory of *karma*, the origin of which can be traced back to the *Upaniṣads*. He introduces the idea of *karma* into his philosophy. It is said that his theory of *karma* is connected with the ascent of human consciousness. As for Buddhist *karma*, he points out its essential phase i.e. its logical connection with the affirmation of the Nihil.

The Buddhist theory of the percipient and the perception and the percept as a construction of Karma, the process of some cosmic fact of Action, gave room to such a conclusion; for it led logically to the affirmation of the Non-Being, Void or Nihil. (*LD*. p. 441.)

This "conclusion" is the statement "the Void of the Infinite alone would be enduring and real". He deals with Buddhist *karma* from an epistemological viewpoint. The "Karma" in the quotation is the action of a universal Life-force according to him. And the subject of the "Karma" is considered as the continuity of the stream of personality in rebirth by mental association according to his notion. He also admits the validity of the

theory of "Karma" and rebirth to the ethical problem concerning pain of this world. But it is unable to solve radically the problem of pain.

His positive estimation of Buddhism is seen in his view of Buddhist universal love. He takes up a legend concerning the Buddha as standing on the threshold of *Nirvāṇa*, of the Non-Being, took a vow never to make the irrevocable crossing so long as there was a single being upon earth undelivered from the knot of suffering, from the ego. But there is no reference to the ideal of *bodhisattva*.

According to Aurobindo, Buddhism is a doctrine of Nihilism which means mind-constructed illusionism and a theory of mind (intellect)-level, has a theory of *karma* which is in accordance with its fundamental standpoint as above mentioned it, and although has the ideal of *Nirvāṇa* i.e. self-extinction in the Void and denies the realization of the ideal in this world, it does not renounce the salvation of beings who suffer, moved by universal love. The remaining problem is the position of Buddhism in *LD*. (The notes omitted)

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