"TO FIGHT IN A RIGHTEOUS WAR": Varna and Moral Duty in India

The system of social classes in India known as the caste system gradually took shape during the thousand years prior to the beginning of the Common Era. The Aryans, an Indo-European speaking people who may have come from the grasslands north of the Caspian Sea, took the lead in creating a four-part division of social classes in which lineal descent was significant, called varnas (a Sanskrit word meaning "color").

The new social system was strongly hierarchical. Priests (brahmans) ranked the highest and warriors (kshatriyas) came next. Merchants, artisans, and peasants (vaishyas) ranked third. The fourth varna was composed of the servants (sudras) of the three higher groups. A fifth category, made up of all those who were engaged in occupations defined as "unclean," stood outside the system of varnas; these people were known as "untouchables." (When the Portuguese arrived in India around 1500 C.E., they translated varna as "caste"; the "caste system" is thus a later European term used to describe Indian social realities.)

The brahmans taught that each varna had its own sacred or moral duty (dharma) to perform. The example we consider in this chapter is that of the warriors, whose sacred duty was to fight. A vivid illustration of the dharma of the warriors can be found in the famous literary text from early India, the Bhagavad Gita (Song of God). The Bhagavad Gita is a portion of a much longer Indian classic, the Mahabharata, the epic tale of a war between two branches of the same family in the distant past. In its present form the Bhagavad Gita dates from the 2nd century B.C.E.

The central theme of the Bhagavad Gita is the dialogue between the warrior Arjuna, who is on the eve of a great battle, and his chariot driver Krishna, who is actually the Hindu god Vishnu. How do the following passages help us to understand the origins of the caste system?

I cannot therefore kill my own kinsmen, the sons of king Dhritarashtra, the brother of my own father. What happiness could we ever enjoy, if we killed our own kinsmen in battle?

Even if they, with minds overcome by greed, see no evil in the destruction of a family, see no sin in the treachery to friends;

Shall we not, who see the evil of destruction, shall we not refrain from this terrible deed?

The destruction of a family destroys its rituals of righteousness, and when the righteous rituals are no more, unrighteousness overcomes the whole family.

When unrighteous disorder prevails, the women sin and are impure; and when women are not pure, Krishna, there is disorder of castes, social confusion.

This disorder carries down to hell the family and the destroyers of the family. The spirits of their dead suffer in pain when deprived of the ritual offerings.

Those evil deeds of the destroyers of a family, which cause this social disorder, destroy the righteousness of birth and the ancestral rituals of righteousness.

And have we not heard that hell is waiting for those whose familiar rituals of righteousness are no more?

O day of darkness! What evil spirit moved our minds when for the sake of an earthly kingdom we came to this field of battle ready to kill our own people?

Better for me indeed if the sons of Dhritarashtra, with arms in hand, found me unarmed, unsubduing, and killed me in the struggle of war.

Thus spoke Arjuna in the field of battle, and letting fall his bow and arrows he sank down in his chariot, his soul overcome by despair and grief.

Then arose the Spirit of Krishna and spoke to Arjuna, his friend, who with eyes filled with tears, thus had sunk into despair and grief.

Whence this lifeless dejection, Arjuna, in this hour, the hour of trial? Strong men know not despair, Arjuna, for this wins neither heaven nor earth.

Fall not into degrading weakness, for this becomes not a man who is a man. Throw off this ignoble discouragement, and arise like a fire that burns all before it.

I owe veneration to Bhishma and Drona. Shall I kill with my arrows my grandfather's brother, great Bhishma? Shall my arrows in battle slay Drona, my teacher?

Shall I kill my own masters who, though greedy of my kingdom, are yet my sacred teachers? I would rather eat in this life the food of a beggar than eat royal food tasting of their blood.

And we know not whether their victory or ours be better for us. The sons of my uncle and king, Dhritarashtra, are here before us; after their death, should we wish to live?

In the dark night of my soul I feel desolation. In my self-pity I see not the way of righteousness. I am thy disciple, come to thee in supplication: be a light unto me on the path of my duty.

For neither the kingdom of the earth, nor the kingdom of the gods in heaven, could give me peace from the fire of sorrow which thus burns my life.

When Arjuna the great warrior had thus unburdened his heart, "I will not fight, Krishna," he said, and then fell silent.

Krishna smiled and spoke to Arjuna—there between the two armies the voice of God spoke these words:

The tears are for those beyond tears; and are thy words words of wisdom? The wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die—for life and death shall pass away.

Because we all have been for all time: I, and thou, and those kings of men. And we all shall be for all time, we all for ever and ever.

As the Spirit of our mortal body wanders on in childhood, and youth and old age, the Spirit wanders on to a new body: of this the sage has no doubts.

From the world of the senses, Arjuna, comes heat and comes cold, and pleasure and pain. They come and they go: they are transient. Arise above them, strong soul.

The man whom these cannot move, whose soul is one, beyond pleasure and pain, is worthy of life in Eternity.

The unreal never is: the Real never is not. This truth indeed has been seen by those who can see the true.

Interwoven in his creation, the Spirit is beyond destruction. No one can bring to an end the Spirit which is everlasting.

For beyond time he dwells in these bodies, though these bodies have an end in their time; but he remains immeasurable, immortal. Therefore, great warrior, carry on thy fight.

If any man thinks he slays, and if another thinks he is slain, neither knows the ways of truth. The Eternal in man cannot kill: the Eternal in man cannot die.
20 He is never born, and he never dies. He is in Eternity; he is for evermore. Never-born and eternal, beyond times gone or to come, he does not die when the body dies.
21 When a man knows him as never-born, everlasting, never-changing, beyond all destruction, how can that man kill a man, or cause another to kill?
22 As a man leaves an old garment and puts on one that is new, the Spirit leaves his mortal body and then puts on one that is new.
23 Weapons cannot hurt the Spirit and fire can never burn him. Untouched is he by drenching waters, untouched is he by parching winds.
24 Beyond the power of sword and fire, beyond the power of waters and winds, the Spirit is everlasting, omnipresent, never-changing, never-moving, ever One.
25 Invisible is he to mortal eyes, beyond thought and beyond change. Know that he is, and cease from sorrow.
26 But if he were born again and again, and again and again he were to die, even then, victorious man, cease thou from sorrow.
27 For all things born in truth must die, and out of death in truth comes life. Face to face with what must be, cease thou from sorrow.
28 Invisible before birth are all beings and after death invisible again. They are seen between two unseen. Why in this truth find sorrow?
29 One sees him in a vision of wonder, and another gives us words of his wonder. There is one who hears of his wonder; but he hears and knows him not.
30 The Spirit that is in all beings is immortal in them all: for the death of what cannot die, cease thou to sorrow.
31 Think thou also of thy duty and do not waver. There is no greater good for a warrior than to fight in a righteous war.
32 There is a war that opens the doors of heavens, Arjuna! Happy the warriors whose fate is to fight such war.
33 But to forgo this fight for righteousness is to forgo thy duty and honour: is to fall into transgression.
34 Men will tell of thy dishonour both now and in times to come. And to a man who is in honour, dishonour is more than death.
35 The great warriors will say that thou hast run from the battle through fear; and those who thought great things of thee will speak of thee in scorn.
36 And thine enemies will speak of thee in contemptuous words of ill-will and derision, pouring scorn upon thy courage. Can there be for a warrior a more shameful fate?
37 In death thy glory in heaven, in victory thy glory on earth. Arise therefore, Arjuna, with thy soul ready to fight.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is Arjuna reluctant to fight?
2. What reasons does Krishna give for urging Arjuna into battle?
3. What clues regarding gender relations in India do you see in these passages? Do you see evidence of how masculinity and femininity were defined?
WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT

Prince Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was born around 560 B.C.E. in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains near the present-day border of India and Nepal. His father was the ruler of one of the many small kingdoms in this region. According to Buddhist tradition, the young prince grew up in luxury and was much sheltered from life's problems. At age 29, however, he suddenly became aware of three causes of deep sorrow for all people: old age, illness, and death. Shocked by his discovery of humankind's suffering, the prince relinquished his royal privileges, left his wife and young son, and joined the ranks of India's many itinerant truth-seekers. Why, he wondered, is misery a part of every person's life?

After six years of wandering the roads of India's Ganges Plain in search of an answer to his question, the former prince entered into a state of deep meditation, an experience he underwent while seated under a fig tree in the village of present-day Bodh Gaya. When he emerged from this trance-like condition, he had achieved "enlightenment" and was henceforth known as the Buddha, the "Enlightened One." Leaving Bodh Gaya, he traveled west to Benares (present-day Varanasi), a major center of commerce and religious devotion on the Ganges River. At a deer park in nearby Sarnath, he delivered his first lecture (or sermon) to a small group of followers. Known as the Four Noble Truths, the lecture summarized the wisdom he had attained under the tree at Bodh Gaya and has traditionally been regarded by Buddhists as the core of the founder's teaching.

For the next 40 years or so, until his death around 483 B.C.E., the Buddha taught at various locations in northern India. He must have been a compelling teacher because he attracted many devoted followers. After his death they kept his teaching alive (and subtly changed it) by creating an organizational structure, a kind of Buddhist "church." They held conferences and formed the world's earliest monastic communities. The monks became active missionaries on behalf of the new faith. Each year during the six months of dry weather they traveled India's dusty roads, carrying little more than a begging bowl, in quest of new converts. (During the rainy months the monks congregated in their monasteries and studied the teachings of the Buddha.) In the 3rd century B.C.E. the standing of Buddhism increased in India when Emperor Asoka (reigned 268–233) became a lay Buddhist and gave support to the monks. Ashoka also sent one of his sons to Sri Lanka with a cutting from the tree at Bodh Gaya, now called the Bodhi Wisdom Tree, to introduce the faith to the South Asian island. By the beginning of the Common Era Buddhism had become an important part of Indian spiritual life and was beginning to spread to other Asian countries.


Chapter 13 / What the Buddha Taught

In studying the Four Noble Truths we journey back 2,500 years to the birth of one of the great world religions. How do the Four Noble Truths help us to understand why the impact of Buddhism has been so lasting?

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

1. The Truth Concerning Misery

And how, O priest, does a priest live, as respects the elements of being, observant of the elements of being in the four noble truths?

Whenever, O priest, a priest knows the truth concerning misery, knows the truth concerning the origin of misery, knows the truth concerning the cessation of misery, knows the truth concerning the path leading to the cessation of misery.

And what, O priest, is the noble truth of misery?

Birth is misery; old age is misery; disease is misery; death is misery; sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair are misery; to wish for what one cannot have is misery; in short, all the five attachment-groups are misery.

This, O priest, is called the noble truth of misery.

2. The Truth of the Origin of Misery

And what, O priest, is the noble truth of the origin of misery?

It is desire leading to rebirth, joining itself to pleasure and passion, and finding delight in every existence—desire, namely, for sensual pleasure, desire for permanent existence, desire for transitory existence.

But where, O priest, does this desire spring up and grow? Where does it settle and take root?

Where anything is delightful and agreeable to men, there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

And what is delightful and agreeable to men, where desire springs up and grows, where it settles and takes root?

The eye is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The ear . . . the nose . . . the tongue . . . the body . . . the mind is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Organs of Sense.

Forms . . . sounds . . . odors . . . tastes . . . things tangible . . . ideas are delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Objects of Sense.

Eye-consciousness . . . ear-consciousness . . . nose-consciousness . . . tongue-consciousness . . . body-consciousness . . . mind-consciousness is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Consciousnesses.

Contact of the eye . . . ear . . . nose . . . tongue . . . body . . . mind is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Contacts.
Sensation produced by contact of the eye... ear... nose... tongue... body... mind is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Sensations.

Perception of forms... sounds... odors... tastes... things tangible... ideas is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Perceptions.

Thinking on forms... sounds... odors... tastes... things tangible... ideas is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Thinkings.

Desire for forms... sounds... odors... tastes... things tangible... ideas is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Desires.

Reasoning on forms... sounds... odors... tastes... things tangible... ideas is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Reasonings.

Reflection on forms... sounds... odors... tastes... things tangible... ideas is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire springs up and grows, there it settles and takes root.

The Six Reflections.

This, O priests, is called the noble truth of the origin of misery.

3. The Truth of the Cessation of Misery

And what, O priests, is the noble truth of the cessation of misery?

It is the complete fading out and cessation of this desire, a giving up, a losing hold, a relinquishment, and a nonadhesion.

But where, O priests, does this desire wane and disappear? Where is it broken up and destroyed? Where anything is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire wanes and disappears, where it is broken up and destroyed.

And what is delightful and agreeable to men, where desire wanes and disappears, there it is broken up and destroyed.

The eye is delightful and agreeable to men; there desire wanes and disappears, there it is broken up and destroyed.

[Similarly respecting the other organs of sense, the six objects of sense, the six consciousnesses, the six contacts, the six sensations, the six perceptions, the six thinkings, the six desires, the six reasonings, and the six reflections.]

This, O priests, is called the noble truth of the cessation of misery.

4. The Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Misery

And what, O priests, is the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of misery?

It is this noble eightfold path, to wit, right belief, right resolve, right speech, right behavior, right occupation, right effort, right contemplation, right concentration.

And what, O priests, is right belief?

The knowledge of misery, O priests, the knowledge of the origin of misery, the knowledge of the cessation of misery, and the knowledge of the path leading to the cessation of misery, this, O priests, is called "right belief."

And what, O priests, is right resolve?

The resolve to renounce sensual pleasures, the resolve to have malice towards none, and the resolve to harm no living creature, this, O priests, is called "right resolve."

And what, O priests, is right speech?

To abstain from falsehood, to abstain from backbiting, to abstain from harsh language, and to abstain from frivolous talk, this, O priests, is called "right speech."

And what, O priests, is right behavior?

To abstain from destroying life, to abstain from taking that which is not given one, and to abstain from immorality, this, O priests, is called "right behavior."

And what, O priests, is right occupation?

Whenever, O priests, a noble disciple, quitting a wrong occupation, gets his livelihood by a right occupation, this, O priests, is called "right occupation."

And what, O priests, is right effort?

Whenever, O priests, a priest purposes, makes an effort, heroically endeavors, applies his mind, and exerts himself that evil and demeritorious qualities not yet arisen may not arise; purposes, makes an effort, heroically endeavors, applies his mind, and exerts himself that evil and demeritorious qualities already arisen may be abandoned; purposes, makes an effort, heroically endeavors, applies his mind, and exerts himself that meritorious qualities not yet arisen may arise; purposes, makes an effort, heroically endeavors, applies his mind, and exerts himself for the preservation, retention, growth, increase, development, and perfection of meritorious qualities already arisen, this, O priest, is called "right effort."

And what, O priests, is right contemplation?

Whenever, O priests, a priest lives, as respects the body, observant of the body, strenuous, conscious, contemplative, and has rid himself of lust and grief; as respects sensations, observant of sensations, strenuous, conscious, contemplative, and has rid himself of lust and grief; as respects the mind, observant of the mind, strenuous, conscious, contemplative, and has rid himself of lust and grief; as respects the elements of being, observant of the elements of being, strenuous, conscious, contemplative, and has rid himself of lust and grief, this, O priest, is called "right contemplation."

And what, O priests, is right concentration?

Whenever, O priests, a priest, having isolated himself from sensual pleasures, having isolated himself from demeritorious traits, and still exercising reasoning, still exercising reflection, enters upon the first trance which is produced by isolation and characterized by joy and happiness; when, through the subsidence of reasoning and reflection, and still retaining joy and happiness, he enters upon the second trance, which is an interior tranquillity and intrenness of the thoughts,
and is produced by concentration; when, through the paling of joy, indifferent, contemplative, conscious, and in the experience of bodily happiness—that state which eminent men describe when they say, "Indifferent, contemplative, and living happily"—he enters upon the third trance; when, through the abandonment of happiness, through the abandonment of misery, through the disappearance of all antecedent gladness and grief, he enters upon the fourth trance, which has neither misery nor happiness, but is contemplation as refined by indifference, this, O priests, is called "right concentration."

This, O priests, is called the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of misery.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. According to the Four Noble Truths, what is the great problem that humans face? What is its solution?
2. Which steps in the eightfold path suggest the goal of social harmony? Which steps focus on the development of mental discipline? Which steps point toward the attainment of wisdom? How do you weigh the relative importance of these three aspects of the eightfold path?
3. What does the eightfold path suggest about the importance of ritual and a priesthood?
4. Does the eightfold path call for an ascetic life? How important is meditation to the eightfold path? What role does the exercise of reason have as one follows the eightfold path? Are the goals of the eightfold path attainable?
5. Is there a particular kind of social structure or set of gender relationships implied in the Four Noble Truths? Do the Four Noble Truths help us to understand why Buddhism in India seems to have appealed more to city-dwellers, especially merchants, rather than peasants? Why are there so many numbers in the Four Noble Truths?
6. How might the ideas represented by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita have contributed to the waning of Buddhism in India?
7. How do the teachings in the Four Noble Truths compare with those of Confucianism and Daoism? What similarities and differences do you see?
8. How do the Four Noble Truths help us to understand why Buddhism spread so widely in Asia? What other evidence would be useful in this regard?