CHAPTER I

THE ETHICS OF INDIA

"All other ways are not worth a fraction of love." THE BUDDHA
"Ahimsā is India's greatest glory." SIR CHARLES ELIOT

I

As in Judaea so in India the coming of a great heresy marks the beginning of a new era—and it is a new era in each case for half humanity. Whether it is India, China or Japan that we are considering, we may divide the history of Asia into the pre-Buddhist, the Buddhist, and the post-Buddhist epochs.

As Christianity came to bring new light and life to the West, so Buddhism came to Asia: and the modern era begins for both when the ancient heritage is re-examined in the light of this new Way and a synthesis is made.

In the pre-Buddhist epoch we see the Aryans becoming Indians as they settle in the north-west, and spread slowly east and south—defending their culture against earlier settlers and aborigines, yet gradually fusing with them, and adopting many of their ways and ideas.

Then, as the priestly caste becomes dominant, we see them enter upon a more reflective stage, work out the doctrines of *karma* and *samsāra*, rebirth according to action, and rationalize the caste-system, which had its roots in a colour-bar and in a division of function.

This first period is from about the fourteenth century B.C. to the sixth, when Sākyamuni the Buddha by his new emphasis on morals and his revolt against priestcraft ushers in a new era of freedom and of moderation, and paves the way for the Imperial house of the Mauryas.

Hinduism replies to the *dharma* or Way of the Buddha, and in the third epoch the life of India is unified by a re-

formed *dharma*, and a new fusion of the secular and the religious is fully worked out as a social code binding on all Hindus. From about the second century A.D. to the seventh this creative period is at its height: but it continues to the present time with intervals of stagnation. Barbarian invaders, Great Moguls and the commercial West are all incidents in this reformation of Hinduism which is the central core of the Indian Renaissance—as the reformation of Christianity is of the Renaissance in Europe, and of Confucianism of the Renaissance in China.

If this view is too schematic it is convenient, and accurate enough for our purpose—the study of ethics. The pre-Buddhist era sees the ethical ideals of India develop from the folk-ways of a nomadic people to those of settled communities; from a naïve to a reasoned stage, and from a lay to a priestly emphasis. Yet the ethic is always twofold. For the layman there is one set of duties, for the religious there is another: and by the beginning of the Buddhist era there is a fairly clean-cut distinction between the duties of the various castes and of the various stages of the individual life. This is a distinctive note of great importance in Indian ethics: moral ideals are relative, regulated by the sanctions of an all-encompassing religious Norm—the Web of Hindu custom.

II

Of the earliest settlers in the Indus Valley we have now enough remains to know that they were not a primitive people. Their fine brick cities, their great baths (perhaps for ritual ablutions), their use of bronze, their many works of art—vigorous statues and seals of great beauty—prove that by the fourth millennium B.C. this part of India, the Indus Valley, was at an advanced stage of culture. But mingling with its higher elements are more primitive things such as tree-worship, human-sacrifice, and phallicism, indicating that their religious and moral ideals were in a state of transition; and something of the same sort is found when we come,

nearly 2000 years latter, to India's earliest writings, the Rig-Veda and the Atharva-Veda. These are the hymns and charms of an aristocratic group of nomads of Aryan stock. They are concerned with the worship and placation of the gods, who are themselves not fully moralized, and some of whom reflect only too faithfully the greed and drunkenness of an army on the march. Yet these early invaders (who seem to know nothing of their "Sumerian" predecessors) have their moral standards. Distinguishing between the "straight" and the "crooked",[1] they are brave and cheerful; they condemn the phallic worships which they find; and they despise the niggardliness of the merchants, who even "withhold from the gods fitting gifts". We get glimpses of their cheerful pastoral and agricultural life, of their rather high ideal of marriage, of the large but vague powers of the father, and above all, of an emerging sense of righteousness, and of sin as separating man from his gods, thought of as closely akin and often called "Brother" and "Father" as well as "Friend". If Indra is a brawler and a drunkard, Varuna is a just god whose forgiveness they are continually seeking. Yet it is necessary to notice that this righteous god, who "stretches the wide heavens like a tent" and looks in upon the guilty conscience of his worshippers, ready to hear their claims and to forgive, gives way to the parricide and drunkard Indra. In other words the concept of *rita*, a natural and moral order which seems to have come with them into India (for it is found also among their Persian cousins, and is akin to the Greek concept of *moira*, harmony), has to struggle against gods who sit loosely to it, yet are gradually brought under its sway. Of these gods there are variously said to be thirty-three, seventy-six and even 3300: but the lines between them are not clearly drawn, and of many of them it is claimed in turn that he is "first among the gods". The Aryan sense of order, however, keeps them within their orbits, eleven of

[1] *Riju* and *vrijna*—words akin to our right and wrong. This distinction is already made among pre-Indian Aryans.

the main deities belonging to each of the three storeys of the sky.

As in the Homeric hymns we have to seek among the inchoate ideas of the people for the germs of the Socratic principles of courage, temperance, and justice, so in the Vedic hymns we find germs of certain great moral concepts emerging. There is first the idea of *tapas* or heat, which comes to be used metaphorically of the fervour of devotion, and then of the fire of austerity, burning up evil. In the tenth book of the Rig-Veda we meet a company of long-haired monks wearing yellow garments, who attain fellowship with the gods by their austerities. Here is the germ of Indian monasticism. Here too is the beginning of *bhakti*, passionate devotion to a god, which was to yield some of the noblest and also some of the most ignoble fruits. If it developed into romantic mysticism it also degenerated into eroticism. If it is given to-day to the Krishna of the Gītā it is even more lavishly given to the Krishna of the Purāna—a lewd godling.

The ideas of sacrifice and of gifts to the priests are also in the Rig-Veda: these produce merit which man will find waiting for him after death in the highest heavens.[1] From such sources develop the master-thoughts of later India—that by asceticism and by alms man attains rebirth in the heavens: and that devotion to a god is an even better way.

We may say then that by about 1000 B.C. India has arrived at certain vague concepts which are to become articulate as the age of poetry passes into that of speculation; and by this time, when Israel was developing her ideal of a theocratic kingdom, India begins to ask who is the One behind the many, to demand order in the chaos of her pantheon, and to seek an ethical concept great enough to guide the gods themselves to truth.

She finds this first in the idea of a Creator of gods and men, and then in the intuition of a Supreme Reality, Brahman-Atman as at once "that from which words turn

[1] R.-V. x, 14, 8.

back" and "that from which evil turns back"[1]—the Ineffable and the Pure. Somewhere between the ninth and the seventh centuries B.C. we see her struggling through the swamps of magic and ritual to the high peaks of mysticism. The Upanishads are, almost solely, concerned with this one reality; and the old legend that Uma, beautiful daughter of the Himalayas, revealed it to the gods, embodies more than a poetic idea. For it is a pictorial expression of the truth that these forest-dwellers in her high mountain-fastnesses discovered what the gods themselves had sought in vain.

The ethical ideals which spring from this monism are characteristic of India: individuality is an illusion: hurting others I harm myself. But there is no self and no others; and morality is regarded sometimes as a means to the end of mystical realization, sometimes as a hindrance. It is a ladder which the bold climber must leave behind.

The law of *karma* and *samsāra*—which is hinted at in the earlier Upanishads—is the law that rebirth follows action in exact retribution: "As a man sows so shall he reap". This now begins to mould all thought. Two great steps were taken in the sixth century when two reformers, both of the Gautama clan, systematized on the one hand this law of *karma*, and on the other the *dharma* or way of moral living which would ensure either a good rebirth or emancipation from the whole process. The *dharma* of the Gautama whom we know as Buddha—the Enlightened—is one great moral system: the *dharma* of his namesake and contemporary is another. Both accept *samsāra* as the evil to be escaped, and *karma* as the way of escape: but one is orthodox, the other heretical in his interpretation.

Karma is a concept of great ethical significance. From it follows the teaching that salvation is not a gift of capricious gods to erring men, but that it can be won by earnest seeking and self-discipline. "According to his deeds and to his mystic insight is a man born as worm or insect, as fish or bird, as lion

[1] Chāndogya Up. VIII, 4.

or boar or serpent or tiger, as man or some higher being." Similarly *dharma* is a developed concept of *rita*—the fitting or orderly is the basis of the Law or Norm of conduct.

To those who would escape rebirth, goodness is defined as "penance and fasting, gifts and purification". Our illustrative readings will make clear the moral qualities of the earnest seeker; it is the glory of India that *ahimsā*—harming no sentient being—is early found amongst them, and is one of the essentials of the good life. It is arresting that this emphasis on gentleness is most characteristic of men of the warrior-caste—Krishna, Sākyamuni, Asoka. It is not weakness but strength.

The *dharma* has as its basis a fourfold division of Hindu society, the first in which the boy passes from the free life of his father's home to the austere school of his *guru* or teacher, the second in which he goes on to the no less disciplined life of the householder, and the third in which he is largely detached from any duty but meditation, until he is ready for a whole-time devotion to religious truth. This is the hall-mark of Indian ethic—that it is relative to the age and to the station of each.

Another great development of *dharma* is the system of caste, which has played so great a part in Indian society, and which is her characteristic social achievement. In an early hymn, which is recited daily from every Vaishnavite altar, is found the claim that the Brahmins are sprung from the head of the primaeval man, the Kshatriyas from his chest and arms, the Vaisyas from his thighs, and the Sūdras from his feet.[1] And soon there follows the more philosophic theory that men are born into a caste fitting their deeds: "They who have done well will soon be born as Brahmin or Kshatriya or Vaisya, but they who have done ill will soon be born as dog or hog or outcast".[2] Thus within the wheel of transmigration moral conduct determines all; the caste-

[1] The Purusa-sukta hymn of Rig-Veda.
[2] Chāndogya Up. v, 10, 7.

system is rationalized; duties accompany privilege, and an ethical ideal is provided for each group: the Brahmin and Kshatriya are expected to live on a higher moral plane.

But soon, in the Brāhmanas or priestly writings, Brahmin claims are becoming so preposterous that Indian ethics are to concern themselves for many centuries with protest and reform. And against morality and true religion magic asserts itself as the priests claim to be gods, and to control the world by the power of sacrifice and the magic of *mantras* or charms. The background for these claims is to be found in the settled order of society in the holy land of the Brahmins between Indus and Jumna, and in the passing of the old family-cult into the exclusive keeping of the priesthood. Thus by the beginning of the sixth century B.C. we find India passing through a transition period in which childish cosmogonies accompany sublime speculation, magic and mysticism strive for the mastery, and religion seeks to control all life. But moral principles all round the globe are also beginning to penetrate ritual and animism, and it is of great interest to watch the process at work. We see, for example, the teacher in one Upanishad interpreting the rumblings of the thunder as meaning *da* (*damyata*) self-discipline, *da* (*datta*) charity, and *da* (*dayadhvam*) alms. This is childish enough,[1] yet towards the Vedic period thunder is still believed to be the elephants of Indra clashing in battle with the Demon of drought, and the new idea has some moral notes. Progress is now rapid: as in Israel the eighth century is a great flowering period in India.

In the Katha Upanishad we find Death himself revealing to the boy who has been sacrificed to him that knowledge of the eternal is only for the pure and self-controlled, and that man must guide the chariot of the senses with wisdom for his charioteer: so only will he come to the goal of his

[1] Curiously enough it has attracted the mind of T. S. Eliot—most intellectual of modern poets.

journey.[1] This is a great advance from the dim Vedic concept of an underworld or "world of the fathers" which awaits the soul after death, and from the hell of the Atharva-Veda, which is a place of darkness and torture, where those who injure Brahmins are seen seated in rivers of blood, eating human hair, and tortured with all the ingenuity of the Inferno.

Another great advance has been made in the concept of Thirst or Desire, *trishnā*, as the great enemy, a thought soon to be worked out by the Buddha, and by contemporary Upanishadic teachers. These early thinkers see that egoism rather than individuality is the root of evil, and they hold out as the ideal man the *muni*, or wandering friar who has "risen above the desire for sons, for wealth and for domination". From such "forest-dwellers" indeed many of the Upanishads proceed, and it is noteworthy that in this period laymen, especially of the warrior-caste, begin to play a great part, challenging the supremacy of the Brahmins; and that women are among the teachers and seekers whom we meet at the courts of kings in argument and debate. It is only by a late and deliberate forgery that an early hymn is changed in the sense that wives are to be burned upon the funeral pyre of their husbands, and at this early stage India knows nothing of *tabus* against beef, or of unnatural practices such as child-marriage.

But we have to wait till the Gītā (first century B.C. to first century A.D.) for an articulate and systematic statement of Hindu ethical teachings. This book, which is India's great source-book for lay religion and ethics, faces concrete issues raised by war and by pacifism, by "nationalism" and early attempts at internationalism, by the conflict between the monastic and the secular life, and especially by the competing systems which are now to demand the attention of the masses. It is part of the Great Epic, which is itself a fruitful

[1] Katha Up. II, 7; III, 9. From this source the Greeks may have got the simile.

field for the ethical ideals of the people, and we see the *dharma* or social code emerging from their folk-ways and customary ethics. But before this great book can be understood we must look at the Buddhist and Jain reforms and their characteristic ethical concepts, and at the great figure of Asoka who raised the issues faced in a concrete form.

Salvation is the object of all alike, and India has come to a clear sense of a connection between sin and suffering, and between moral discipline and emancipation. Escape from rebirth by overcoming evil—this is common ground to the great Upanishadic seers and to the heretical teachers. But Buddhism and Jainism were distinct in what they denied as well as in new emphases. *Ahimsā*—harmlessness, for example, is expressly commanded in the early Upanishads: men are to take no life except for sacrifices. This exception the new movements condemn, but like the Upanishads they make much of asceticism and contemplation: without these there is no wisdom.

III

The great reform movement which Sākyamuni initiated must be understood in the light of the Upanishads as well as of the religion of the masses. Both, in his judgment, had gone to extremes, and his was a Middle Path between them. It was a Middle Path between credulity and scepticism, but also between the life of indulgence and the life of austerity. It is thus largely an ethical reform, and the ethics of the Buddhists have become one of the great systems of the world. But it must not be forgotten that Buddhism was, from the beginning, a religion as well as an ethic, and that it became the vehicle for Indian culture to the Far East and to Southern Asia. Thus while its ethical ideals are to-day more Asiatic than Indian, and it belongs to Southern and Eastern Asia more than to the land of its birth, yet they are in origin and in essence the spiritual and moral ideals of India expressing

themselves through her greatest son. He is in the line of succession of her great *rishis* or seers, as Jesus is in the line of the great prophets of Israel, and Socrates in that of the sophists of Greece.

Born in 563 B.C. Sākyamuni of the Gautama family belonged to the north-east country of the foothills, and is sometimes claimed as of Mongolian stock. But his language was a dialect of what we know as Sanskrit, and his whole setting is Indian. One hall-mark of his movement was its call to moral earnestness. He saw that the mystic ideal of the Upanishads was often "beyond good and evil" as the Vedic gods were often below them, and that the masses were perishing for lack of clear guidance. "Not of one essence are good and evil" is one of his great sayings, and another is "Know truth as truth and untruth as untruth". Himself of the warrior-caste he saw that men needed a guide to action, and himself a mystic he realized that insight depends upon purity of life. In this lay not only the way to freedom, but freedom itself. Thus while he accepted the doctrines of *karma* and *samsāra*—act and rebirth—he filled them with new moral content, teaching that salvation was primarily liberation from evil, and that if man was to find reality he must be guided to right living. To lose himself he must first find himself. So he analysed the hydra-headed monster of desire, *tanhā*, into its constituent parts, *rāga* (lust), *dōsa* (malice), *mōha* (stupidity), and taught that *nibbāna* or freedom consists in the ending of these evils as well as in escape from *samsāra*. The *arhat*, "who has cut the bonds", is accordingly the ideal man of this early Buddhism, akin to the free man of the Stoics, and like him seeking a kingdom of the mind. He is the old Indian *rishi* fully awake to moral values: *nibbāna* is enlightenment and emancipation from evil: it is more ethical than its Upanishadic equivalent.

But the Buddha himself was no stoic, in the sense of detachment from the world: he had too deep a sympathy with misguided and sorrowing humanity, and led too active a life