

**THE PATH TO A NEW AWAKENING:
B. R. AMBEDKAR'S TRANSFORMATION OF
BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to analyze the philosophical implications of Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism. This approach created a new social philosophy based on Buddhist ideas and a political commitment to social justice, particularly for the Dalits of India. What was the purpose of this social philosophy? To transform Buddhist philosophy? Or rather, to oppose Brahmanism and empower the lower castes?

After a twenty-year-long study of Indian society and history, and Indian philosophical and religious traditions, Ambedkar came to the conclusion that Buddhism could have the power to transform the situation of the Untouchables. Why did he think that Buddhism would have this radical transformative impact not only for Dalits, but for Indian society as a whole?

In 1956, in what became a historical event, he led a movement of conversion of more than five hundred thousand Untouchables from Hinduism to Buddhism. Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a way and as a tool to empower the lower castes of India. But what type of Buddhism did he envision? In 1956, in that historical event, Ambedkar founded what he called Navayana Buddhism. He used the word *Navayana* to refer to the birth of a new school. *Nava* means "new," *Yana* means "vehicle". Was he indeed creating a new *yana*, or new vehicle? What type of Buddhist school was this? What innovations did he introduce? Is the result still Buddhism, given Ambedkar's vision? This thesis aims to address all these questions.

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Introduction

The objective of this thesis is to analyze the philosophical implications of Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism. This approach created a new social philosophy based on Buddhist ideas and a political commitment to social justice, particularly for the Dalits¹ of India. What was the purpose of this social philosophy? To transform Buddhist philosophy? Or rather, to oppose Brahmanism and empower the lower castes?

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was one of the founding fathers of the Republic of India. He was a jurist, economist, politician, and social reformer who dedicated his life to supporting the rights of the Untouchables and ending discrimination against them in Indian society. Ambedkar himself was an Untouchable, from the Mahar caste. Being an Untouchable is a designation that comes from the Hindu caste system that assigns each person into a specific caste from birth. To be an Untouchable is to be considered as contaminated from birth. Even today Untouchables, along with other lower castes, face violence and discrimination from the higher castes, particularly in access to jobs and education. The Constitution of India, one of whose main architects was Ambedkar, takes great steps to guarantee equality and fundamental rights for all members of the Indian society: It makes untouchability illegal, and it prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste. However, this social discrimination still exists, because it is an intrinsic part of the Hindu caste system and has been part of Indian society for thousands of years. One of Ambedkar's objectives was to bring this situation to an end and he worked throughout his life to make that possible. Even today we see how relevant and alive his message is. Thousands of people in India hold Ambedkar's image as a symbol of freedom and equality, against the violence and oppression against lower castes that successive governments have failed to eradicate.

Ambedkar became the leader of a movement for the liberation of the Untouchables and worked for a transformation of Indian society. He wondered, however, if this deep transformation would really be possible within the Hindu social system. Would Hinduism support the end of the discrimination suffered

¹ Dalit is a Sanskrit and Hindi word that means "broken" and it refers to the members of those castes who were subjected to untouchability. Untouchability is a practice of discrimination and segregation that took place in India and other regions for thousands of years. In the 1930s Ambedkar used the term "Dalit" to refer to all oppressed, poor, or discriminated members of society, including women. Its use grew during the 1970s, when it was used by the group Dalit Panthers. Modern legislation prefers the term "Scheduled Castes" which is considered an official term.

by Dalits for thousands of years under their caste system? After a twenty-year-long study of Indian society and history, and Indian philosophical and religious traditions, Ambedkar came to the conclusion that Buddhism could have the power to transform the situation of the Untouchables. Why did he think that Buddhism would have this radical transformative impact not only for Dalits, but for Indian society as a whole?

In 1956, in what became a historical event, he led a movement of conversion of more than five hundred thousand Untouchables from Hinduism to Buddhism. Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a way and as a tool to empower the lower castes of India. But what type of Buddhism did he envision? In 1956, in that historical event, Ambedkar founded what he called Navayana Buddhism. He used the word *Navayana* to refer to the birth of a new school. *Nava* means “new,” *Yana* means “vehicle”. Was he indeed creating a new *yana*, or new vehicle? What type of Buddhist school was this? What innovations did he introduce? Is the result still Buddhism, given Ambedkar's radical vision? This thesis aims to address these questions.

Navayana Buddhism transforms some of the main elements usually attributed to Buddhism, such as the theory of Karma and the goal of Nirvana. A first approach may suggest that Ambedkar did this in order to question Buddhist philosophy, however, a further analysis could bring a different conclusion. Through this thesis we will explore how Ambedkar elaborated his new approach in order to oppose Brahmanic philosophy and the social structures it creates. It may seem that Navayana Buddhism was created to transform Buddhist philosophy and, we will see, Ambedkar certainly transformed many of its core concepts. This thesis research will also try to uncover how Ambedkar's transformation was, in essence, an attempt to question the foundations of this societal structure.

Ambedkar wanted Navayana Buddhism to be a school for the empowerment of lower castes, women, and Untouchables. However, Ambedkar announced Navayana as a Buddhist school, rather than a political movement. Although at first look, a Buddhist school and a political movement might seem to be two different things, for Ambedkar, both could certainly work together, and Navayana Buddhism was, in a way, envisioned to join both as one tool. While for some, Navayana can hardly be considered actual Buddhism, for others, it is one of the most important representatives of what today is the Engaged Buddhist movement. A deeper exploration of Ambedkar's philosophy will help to appreciate his aims and the nature of his reading of Buddhism.

The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to analyze Navayana Buddhism as it was founded by Ambedkar, and its main philosophical characteristics and innovations: His transformation of the Four Noble Truths; his understanding of the cause of suffering and the three paths to end sufferings; the elements of the Navayana Dhamma, with special focus on its social message; and his reformulation of the theories of Anatta, Rebirth, Karma, and Nirvana, focussing especially on the theory of Karma. I provide a study of the historical context of the creation of Navayana Buddhism and the philosophical influences on Ambedkar. Navayana Buddhism is also analyzed in the broader context of contemporary Buddhist movements, in particular Engaged Buddhism. Navayana Buddhism is considered by some as the starting point of this new form of socially engaged Buddhism, and therefore as one of Ambedkar's important legacies. I also briefly compare Navayana Buddhism with Liberation Theology, an example of another contemporary socially engaged form of spirituality.

The line of argument presented in this thesis is that Navayana Buddhism may be considered a new school of Buddhism. Ambedkar, in a way, uses Buddhism to criticize Hindu society and to find an alternative to what he saw as the Hindu social and philosophical system, which discriminates against lower castes and excludes them from basic human rights. He sees Buddhism as based on compassion and equality, at whose core there is respect for all humans. Buddhism, for him, establishes a path for all humanity to reach liberation, and he aimed to create a movement that rejected Hinduism and empowered the lower castes in India.

In order to do this, he sees the need to reformulate certain elements of Buddhist teachings; elements that, for Ambedkar, may have been inherited by the Buddhist tradition in a different way than the Buddha originally taught. Some of these elements are as central to Buddhism as the Four Noble Truths or Nirvana. In an attempt to bring the Buddha's teachings to its original form, values such as equality and dignity now become central tenets of Ambedkar's approach to Buddhist philosophy.

Ambedkar also presents a secular form of Buddhism, in line with the scientific discoveries of his time. Navayana philosophy gathers the traditions of the European Enlightenment, the North American pragmatism of John Dewey, and certain Western values such as those of human rights, critical thinking, and social justice. Navayana Buddhism was greatly influenced by traditions both from the East and the West, through Ambedkar's study of both Indian and Western philosophy and his own experience living in

India, the United States, and England. His philosophy was permeated by rationalism and scientific thought, but also influenced by the study of Buddhist scholars with a more secular approach. This gives Navayana philosophy its particular shape, a shape that other Buddhist movements, mostly in the West, have also adopted in recent decades.

Ambekdar had a deep respect for religions and the role they play in the advancement of societies. For him, religions are not a residue of the past, but they play a major role in the progress of humanity. Some religions, however, may act as a burden from the past, and this is the way he saw Hinduism's effect on India. But religions could also have the potential to bring societies to a new stage of evolution through the promotion of equality and social justice. That is what he envisioned for Navayana Buddhism.

Navayana Buddhism has a foundational text, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, written by Ambekdar and published in 1957. *The Buddha and his Dhamma* is the central point of this research.

The first chapter of this thesis is an introduction to Buddhism, especially in those aspects that affect Navayana Buddhism and Ambedkar's philosophy. This first part introduces Engaged Buddhism as a modern form of socially concerned Buddhism. It explains what characterizes this movement, since those features may also be found in Navayana as an early form of engaged Buddhism. The second chapter of this thesis analyzes the context in which Navayana Buddhism was born, Ambedkar's purpose and his philosophical influences. The third chapter is an analysis of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, through which Ambedkar presents his Navayana philosophy. This analysis focuses on the philosophical innovations that Ambedkar introduces, in particular on his transformation of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the theories of Anatta, Rebirth, Karma, and Nibbana. The fourth chapter is a comparison between Navayana Buddhism and other types of socially engaged forms of spirituality. In particular, it is compared with Engaged Buddhism, of which Navayana Buddhism is considered to be a part, and Liberation Theology, born at the same time as Navayana Buddhism and with similar purposes.

1. Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism

1.1. Buddhism and Buddhist Schools

In 1956, B.R. Ambedkar led a mass conversion of thousands of Dalits to Buddhism. This conversion was the result of his more than twenty years of study of Indian philosophical and religious traditions, as well as other religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. Ambedkar's mass conversion not only

meant the adoption of Buddhism, but also his announcement of a new school: Navayana Buddhism. With Navayana Buddhism, Ambedkar wanted to return to the original message of the Buddha but, at the same time, he wanted to transform it so that it could also serve to give voice to the lower classes in India. But is this a new Buddhist school? Or is it rather a social philosophy of transformation which incorporates Buddhist elements? What type of transformations did Ambedkar carry out?

Transformation means creating something new out of a tradition, and traditions are embedded in their own history and evolution. The following is a brief introduction to Buddhism, always considered in the context of Ambedkar's legacy. Ambedkar, like millions of others in India, was born an Untouchable, a member of the lower castes, who have suffered violence and discrimination for thousands of years. His conversion to Buddhism, which took place near the end of his life, responds to a historical situation created by the Hindu caste system. But Ambedkar also, with his conversion, explicitly announced a new school, Navayana Buddhism, which opened the doors to a form of Buddhism characterized by social and political engagement. This may not be new in Buddhist history; however, following the foundation of Navayana, a wave of socially engaged forms of Buddhism spread throughout Asia and around the world, most notably in North America, during the second half of the twentieth century. Ambedkar's legacy spearheaded a different understanding of Buddhism that embraced the tradition while responding to the issues of its time. This, however, does not close the possibility of understanding Navayana as uniquely a social philosophy, rejecting the idea that it actually founded of a new Buddhist school. By exploring some of the characteristics of Buddhism, and through an analysis of Navayana Philosophy, we will be better equipped to take a stand in regards to whether Navayana is a social philosophy, a new school of Buddhism, or both.

Before entering into the details of Ambedkar's Buddhist philosophy, let us first consider in general terms what Buddhism is, its major schools, the teachings shared by most them, and the historical context in which it was born. This introduction will help to address Ambedkar's interpretations and innovations, and to analyze Navayana Buddhism under a broader perspective of what Buddhism is, and its role in society, in particular in the Indian society of Ambedkar's time.

1.1.1. What is Buddhism?

Buddha is a Sanskrit and Pali word that means “Awakened One” and it is usually understood as a person who has awakened fully to the final truth of things, and who has liberated himself from all forms of suffering. “Whether Buddhas arise, O monks, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact that... all [the world’s] constituents are transitory... that all its constituents are dissatisfactory... that all its constituents are lacking a permanent self.”² These words of the Buddha reveal the foundations of Buddhist thought: The understanding of the nature of impermanence, suffering, and no-self. The Buddha’s realization of these three ideas sets the beginning of the Buddhist path, a path that leads to a transformation, an awakening, an experience that, in Buddhism and other religious traditions, is known as Nirvana. Understanding impermanence, suffering, and no-self, is ultimately a lifelong process of learning and transformation that involves certain practices which, according to early texts, were begun by the Buddha, and today are commonly shared by most Buddhist schools.

Becoming a Buddhist is a transformative process that varies greatly from country to country, from school to school, and from person to person. However, a first common step shared by all is the symbolic act of what is called “taking of refuge” in three basic elements. These basic elements, for Buddhists, become like “refuges”, because they serve as protection and guide in their learning process. These elements are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Buddha is considered the ultimate spiritual refuge, because, for Buddhists, he is the one who has already walked this path and whose example guides them. The Dharma are the Buddha’s teachings, which describe the Buddhist understanding of reality, a way of life, and ethics, as well as how to incorporate these into daily life. The Sangha is the community of those who are on the Buddhist path. From a Buddhist perspective, each member of the community is at a different point along the path, and every member gives support to everyone else. This support is based on the understanding that they are all on the same journey, but they come from different circumstances, social situations, and levels of consciousness.³

Buddhism is founded on a combination of study and practice, in which an experiential knowledge of the nature of reality is integrated into the practitioner’s own life. Its ultimate purpose is to liberate from

² *Anguttara Nikaya*, III, 134.

³ “The Doctrinal Position of the Buddha in Context”, p. 2, in Williams, Tribe, and Wynne, 2012.

all the suffering that life brings. Buddhists, therefore, seek liberation, but rather than focussing on it as a goal, they tend to emphasize the process, the path, rather than the end. Buddhism is therefore considered a path of transformation. Transformation here means radical change of the individual. For Buddhists, this change comes from a realization or awakening to an understanding of the nature of reality. This realization involves, first, a transformation of the mind which, in turn, also involves liberation from the negative states of greed, hatred, and delusion, as well as the creation of positive states of non attachment, loving kindness, and wisdom.

Although there has been much debated about what the Buddha actually taught, there are certain basic tenets that are usually agreed by Buddhist scholars as being the Buddha's own teachings and words. "As for his specific teachings, scholars have always debated about what the Buddha actually taught, since even the earliest texts that record his teachings were written down hundreds of years after his death. However, scholars usually agree that there are certain basic teaching, which since they are presented in so many places throughout the early texts, must represent at least the kinds of things the Buddha actually taught."⁴ In the following section we introduce what these basic teachings are. All the ones presented here were either questioned or reformulated in Ambedkar's philosophy. Here we give a brief introduction to them, acknowledging their complexity, as well as the different approaches that each Buddhist school provides. The purpose of this introduction is to set-the stage for the presentation, in later chapters, of Ambedkar's Navayana philosophy, and the particular approach he brings to these teachings.

1.1.2. Common Buddhist Teachings

1. No Self and Dependent Arising

The Buddhist concept of no-self is based on the idea of the impermanent nature of reality, including human nature. What is usually called *self* is understood as formed by five constituents, called by the Buddha the "Five Aggregates" (*skandha*, Sanskrit, *khandha*, Pali). These five aggregates are: the body; feelings and the sensations associated with the body; perceptions; mental formations, understood as mental states, attitudes, and dispositions⁵; and lastly, consciousness, understood as mental awareness.

⁴ "The Teachings of the Buddha", p. 32, in Mitchell and Jacoby, 2014.

⁵ These, we will see, are especially important in Navayana Buddhism, since they are the ones that ultimately move towards good or bad actions, and therefore, a sense of morality.

Another essential teaching of the Buddha is that of dependent arising. Dependent arising can be explained as a type of conditioned origination, a kind of principle of conditionality according to which everything arises and ceases to be due to certain conditions. “When necessary conditions are present to support a thing’s existence, it comes to be. As those conditions change and new conditions appear, the thing changes. When the conditions for the thing’s existence are finally removed, the thing ceases to be.”⁶ This idea applies to all reality, and therefore, to human existence and human suffering as well. For that reason, it becomes essential to learn what the conditions are that create the arising of human suffering, its change and, ultimately, its removal. Eliminating human suffering is at the core of Buddha’s teachings, and it is also key in Navayana Philosophy. However, we will see, many of Ambedkar’s innovations come from a different understanding of how this process of arising, change, and removal of human suffering takes place.

2. Karma and Rebirth

Human experience is determined by our attachment to certain things or feelings. These continuous patterns determine how people live their lives, how they see the world, and how they relate to other people. “Birth,” in the Buddhist tradition, has been understood both as being reborn after a past life, or being metaphorically reborn, such as after a life-changing event. Both interpretations accept the influence of *karma*. *Karma* is a Sanskrit word that means “action” and is usually understood, both in Buddhism and Hinduism, as the consequences brought about by a person’s actions. From a Buddhist perspective, it is the intentions behind a person’s actions that determine if an action is good or bad and, therefore, what consequences this action ultimately brings. “It is will [*cetana*], O monks, that I call Karma; for having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind.”⁷ It is human’s conscious character, therefore, that determines their good or bad actions, which reflect how a person chooses to live their life. The Buddha talked about wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akulasa*) acts. A wholesome action is one that produces positive attitudes and states of mind and body, both for the person who does it and for the ones affected. These types of actions ultimately lead to the realization of Nirvana. An unwholesome action is one that is harm-

⁶ Mitchel and Jacoby, p. 38.

⁷ *Anguttara Nikaya*, Book of Threes (III).

ful for the person or other people, and is motivated by what are called the “Three Root Evils”: greed, hatred, and delusion. From a Buddhist perspective, for the realization of Nirvana, one should cultivate the attitudes that bring about wholesome actions. A person’s actions will then be motivated by intentions such as generosity, patience, loving kindness, compassion, clarity of mind, and insight.

3. The Four Noble Truths

The Five Aggregates, that is, the five impermanent factors of human existence, demonstrate from a Buddhist perspective that there is no permanent substantial self. It is the human way of perceiving, thinking, and feeling that cause human’s unwholesome patterns and behaviours and ultimately cause suffering for oneself and others. Moved by this realization, the Buddha delivers his First Sermon, which is considered the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma. This sermon presented what are called the Four Noble Truths, which refer to the suffering of the human condition, its cause, the possibility of putting an end to this suffering, and the path that leads to its end. This end means the realization of Nirvana. The path to Nirvana, from a Buddhist perspective, involves facing the truth about a person’s own life, and about life itself. It also involves finding the causes of one’s suffering, healing it, and realizing a truly satisfactory life. In the First Sermon, the Buddha talks about what this truly satisfactory life entails and the path to realize it. He says:

“These two extremes, O monks, are not to be practiced by one who has gone forth from the world. What are these two extremes? That one which is joined with the passions, low and vulgar, common, ignoble and useless. And also that one which is joined with self-torture and pain, ignoble and useless. Avoiding those two extremes, the [Buddha] has gained the knowledge of the Middle Way, which gives sight and knowledge, tends to calm, to insight, to Awakening and Nirvana. What, O monks, is the Middle Way...? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration...”⁸

The Buddha called this middle way the “Eightfold Path”, which is the path that leads to a life in Nirvana. According to this path, this is a life lived in moral discipline with oneself and others, and which incorporates meditation practice, and a deep insight into the nature of one’s life and life in general. It is

⁸ *Samyutta Nikaya*, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta

important to notice that the Buddha first introduces this path, the path to Nirvana, and it is only then that he presents the Four Noble Truths. It could be said that the introduction of this path of individual and social transformation informs the Buddha's presentation of the truths about human existence.

The First Noble Truth is the truth of *dukkha*, the truth that human experience is characterized by sorrow, lamentation, and despair. The Second Noble Truth is the truth about the cause of *dukkha*. "Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the cause of *dukkha*: that craving which leads to rebirth, combined with pleasure and passion, finding pleasure here and there. This is the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving for continued becoming, and the craving for non-becoming."⁹ Trying to find happiness in these pleasures only causes more frustration and suffering, to oneself and others.¹⁰ An important key point is that, according to the First Sermon, it is ignorance of this condition that causes the deepest form of suffering. Therefore, the learning and realization of the causes of one's suffering is fundamental to propel its end.

The Third Noble Truth expresses the cessation of *dukkha*, brought about by the extinction of cravings, as well as the cessation of the Three Root Evils, hatred, greed, and delusion. The result of the cessation of *dukkha*, as the Fourth Noble Truth expresses, is Nirvana. The Fourth Noble Truth presents, therefore, the path that leads to the cessation of *dukkha* and, ultimately, Nirvana. "Now this, O monks, is the noble truth of the way that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*. This is the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration..."¹¹ The Fourth Noble Truth introduces the path to transform a person's life from one characterized by suffering to one lived in freedom, peace, and happiness. This is accomplished by following the Eightfold Path. But what exactly is the Eightfold Path?

4. The Eightfold Path

For the Buddha, emancipation from suffering is Nirvana. This emancipation happens by the attainment of an awakening. This is a kind of awakening that takes places by following what is called the

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ According to some interpretations of the Buddha's teachings, Ambedkar's being one of them, it is also here, in this constant craving, that the psychological basis for social conflict and injustice can be found. Further detail on this aspect will be given in this thesis's analysis of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

¹¹ *Samyutta Nikaya*, Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta.

Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path consists of a series of steps that one should follow in order to reach the long-lasting happiness brought about by the attainment of Nirvana. These steps should not be taken as a dogma, but rather experienced in a person's life. The eight steps in this path are usually arranged in three categories: the first two steps, Right Understanding and Right Thought, refer to the idea of "Proper View". These refer to the way of thinking one should develop in the process of awakening. The steps of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood would fall under the category of "Proper Conduct" and they refer to the kinds of living conducive to the Buddhist understanding of Nirvana. The steps of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration are understood as "Proper Practice". They refer to practices that develop the view and the conduct conducive to an awakened life.

5. Nirvana

"Whatever... is the cessation of greed, hatred and delusion, this is called Nirvana"¹² According to this passage, for the Buddha, Nirvana is a kind of freedom that is achieved when the causes of dukkha are eliminated.¹³ In this way, Nirvana means the elimination of the unwholesome attitudes that lead to the Three Roots of Evil so that wholesome attitudes can flourish. Both the elimination of greed, hatred, and delusion, along with the cultivation of compassion, loving kindness, joy, and equanimity, are then necessary for Nirvana to be realized. The cultivation of these wholesome attitudes is often called the Four Divine Abodes, which refer to the way a person relates to others. Along with these, a person who lives in Nirvana has also cultivated what Buddhists call the Six Perfections: generosity, morality, patience to endure difficulties, energy to change what one can for the better, equanimity of meditation, and wisdom about the truth of existence. These perfections would arise and naturally flow in a person who has experienced Nirvana. The state of Nirvana, then, means liberation from dukkha, and it involves inner freedom, detachment from things, care for all beings, the perfection of virtues, and wisdom about the ultimate truth of reality. In general terms, a person who lives in Nirvana lives kindly and compassionately for the good of all beings.

¹² Ibid, volume IV, page 251, Parinibbana Sutta.

¹³ "The Buddha never spoke very much about what Nirvana ultimately is. (...) In fact, volumes have been written in which scholars have tried to answer the question, "What is Nirvana?" Some claim that it is an absolute Truth. Others say it is a transcendent metaphysical Reality. Still others argue that it is a super mundane experience or a supreme and pure state of mind." Mitchel and Jacoby, p. 50

1.1.3. The Buddha's Historical Context

When the Buddha was born, and throughout his life, the authority of the brahmins was already well established in the Indian society, and Buddhism was partly born as a response to this. The Buddha rejected the final religious authority of the brahmins and their fundamental scriptures, the Vedas. It is true that the characteristics of the Indian society at the time of the Buddha were very different from modern Indian society. However, there are certain fundamental elements of Hindu culture in general and Brahmanism in particular that have remained unchanged. Knowing this helps us understand the significance of the Buddha's position towards brahmins, as well as that of Ambedkar's philosophy, the potential he saw in Buddhism, and finally his conversion.

The societal structure in northern India at the time of the Buddha resembled a class system that situated the brahmins on top of a pyramid of strict social division. Something that remained unchanged over the centuries is the fact that brahmins were, and still are, determined by birth, and they are set in this position; a position based on the purity of their lineage and occupation. Because of the importance of this purity, the work brahmins perform has to be freed from any action that, in their understanding, brings impurity and pollution. These tasks must be performed by other members of the society. "Classical brahmanic texts dating from Vedic times and beyond refer to a society divided into the four classes (*varnas*) of brahmins (*brahmanas*), warriors/rulers (*ksatriyas*), generators of wealth (*vaisyas*) and the rest ('servants', *sudras*). This division is by birth, it is a division of purity, and it is strictly hierarchical. Each preceding class is purer and therefore superior to the following."¹⁴ This, therefore, implies that those tasks involving impurity and pollution would be done by the sudras. This was a characteristic of the Indian society in the time of the Buddha and before, and has persisted throughout centuries. The hierarchy of this structure has had a radical impact in modern India and will play a crucial role in Ambedkar's life and his approach to Buddhist philosophy.

The accounts of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama's life, describe him as someone who left his home and family behind and embarked on an existential quest - a quest which would liberate humanity from the suffering of existence. For some scholars, his decision was aligned with the historical context

¹⁴ "The Doctrinal Position of the Buddha in Context", p. 10, in Williams, Tribe, and Wynne, 2012.

and the cultural atmosphere of his time. This was a time of development of urban environments, where diversity and inequality were rising. It was a time of questioning old values and of a general mood of inquiry. The development of cities also brought an increase of diseases and epidemics, with higher rates of mortality.¹⁵ Ambedkar's philosophical enquiry into the Buddhist concept of *dukkha* takes all these factors into consideration. Both the Buddha and Ambedkar grew in a historical context of inequality and, for Ambedkar, this would have necessarily had an impact on the Buddha's process of transformation. Although Ambedkar does not provide clear evidence to support this claim, as we will see, it plays a major role in Ambedkar's interpretation of the Buddha's teachings and ultimately, in his construction of Navayana philosophy.

1.1.4. The Buddhist Canon and The Buddha's Dhamma

There are different versions of what is considered to be the canonical corpus of Buddhism. There are, for example, the Theravada or 'Pali' Canon, the Mahasamghika Canon, and the Sarvastivada Canon, pertaining to different schools, Theravada, Mahasamghika, Sarvastivada, respectively. However, "the only complete canon of an early Buddhist sect surviving in its original Indian language is the Pali Canon, and the Theravada sect is the only representative of these early sects of Buddhism to have survived to the modern day in something resembling its ancient form. (...) It would be wrong to think unquestioningly that the Theravada sect *is* original Buddhism, and its canon *is* the original word of the Buddha"¹⁶ In the Buddhist tradition the authenticity and accuracy of the Buddha's words should not be as important as the teachings themselves, the Dharma, and the fact that the Buddhist path is understood as an experiential path, of daily practice, and personal realization. The Buddha's last words, gathered in the the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, refer to what should have the highest importance when it comes to his legacy, not him or a specific authority, but his practices and teachings: "Then the Blessed One addressed the Venerable Ananda: 'It may be, Ananda, that to some of you the thought may come: "Here are (we have) the Words of the Teacher who is gone; our Teacher we have with us no more". But Ananda, it should not be consid-

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 22 and 23.

ered in this light. What I have taught and laid down, Ananda, as Doctrine (*Dhamma*) and Discipline (*Vinaya*), this will, be your teacher when I am gone.¹⁷

Theravada Buddhism and its philosophical approach has played a major role in Buddhist history and practice. However, in order to analyse Navayana Buddhism, it is necessary to have a broader understanding of today's major Buddhist schools and some of their main features. A brief description of these schools follows in the next section. Far from being comprehensive, these descriptions should be seen as a background and foundation for the analysis of Navayana Buddhism and the innovations it introduces. Accepting or rejecting Navayana as a different school is left to the consideration of the reader. Navayana Buddhism was not created with the purpose of being recognized as a different branch of Buddhism - it was stated as a school of Buddhism the same day it was founded by Ambedkar in 1956. This claim is, of course, questionable. Navayana Buddhism was not formulated by a life-long Buddhist practitioner, but by a politician and statesman, whose purpose was to break off from Hinduism. It was founded by a member of a low caste and, as a consequence, it was born out of the deep inequalities that the Hindu social structures created. Ambedkar's aim was not to fight for the status of Navayana as a new school of Buddhism, but to empower the lower castes in India in general, and the Dalits in particular, as members with full rights in their society. For him, this would never be possible under the Hindu caste system. Ambedkar felt that only Buddhism would have the characteristics to bring about the changes, to empower the Dalit community, to transform the societal structure, and to bring about a change in the level of consciousness that would create a new society.¹⁸ This was Ambedkar's main purpose in founding Navayana Buddhism.

1.1.5. Main Buddhist Schools

The four major divisions of Buddhism that are included in this section are Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and East Asian Buddhism. East Asian Buddhism is not considered a school but it is a term used to describe the Buddhist schools derived from the Mahayana tradition that spread throughout East and Southeast Asia under the influence of Chinese Buddhism. Because of its possible relation to Engaged

¹⁷ "Selected Texts: The Last Words of the Buddha," p. 136, in Rahula, W. 1978.

¹⁸ This was Ambedkar's claim. Some Dalits, however, turn to Islam or Christianity instead, and some try to rise within the caste system.

Buddhism, in this section we include it as a major division and we approach it from the perspective of the birth of Chinese Buddhism and its philosophical influences.

1. Theravada¹⁹

Theravada is the major Buddhist school among the populations of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. There are also important Theravada minorities in India, Nepal, and in Western countries such as France, United States, and Canada. Today, Theravada Buddhism is applied to those Buddhist communities that spread from the Mahavihara Temple in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. These communities gave themselves the term *Theravada*, which refers to those who were the personal disciples of the historical Buddha. This fact has been largely questioned for different reasons. One of them is that the term was used for the first time in the 12th century, that is, around seventeen centuries after the life of the historical Buddha. Another reason is that there is no clear evidence of *thera* communities in the Indian subcontinent before this time.²⁰ Following the historical development of Buddhism in India, it seems that after the Buddha died, communities developed in harmony until there was a split between a smaller community of elders and the broader community. The reasons for this split are not clear, but it could have been due to differences in principles or monastic regulations. In fact, one of the main distinctive features of the Theravada identity is related to monastic life and regulations, along with Abhidhamma and the Pali Canon..

The Pali Canon is the canon of scriptural literature preserved in the Pali language by the Theravada tradition. It is also called the *Tipitaka* or *Tripitaka*, because it consists of three sections.²¹ These sections are: The *Vinaya Pitaka*, which treats issues of monastic discipline. The *Sutta Pitaka*, or the section of Discourses. The *Sutta Pitaka* is divided into four subsections called *Nikayas*: The *Digha Nikaya*; the *Majjhima Nikaya*; the *Samyutta Nikaya*; and the *Anguttara Nikaya*. The third section of the *Tripitaka* is the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. The *Abhidhamma Pitaka* is later in origin than the other *pitakas*. This section is fundamental to understanding how the Theravada tradition differentiates itself from other schools. It is

¹⁹ “Theravada. History and Context” Andrew Skilton, pp. 71-73, in Steven, 2008.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 72.

²¹ “The Doctrinal Position of the Buddha in Context”, p. 78, in Williams, Tribe, and Wynne, 2012.

composed of seven books of a more philosophical content. Some of its topics are the doctrine of the absence of self or *anatta*; action, *kamma*, and its outcomes; the nature of the Buddha and the *arahat*; and the nature of enlightenment, among others.

2. Mahayana²²

All Buddhist schools understand that ignorance is one of the root causes of suffering. Liberation from this ignorance in order to have a direct insight of the true nature of reality is a basic orientation of all Buddhist schools. This ignorance is based on habits of the mind and on the way the mind works. This leads to ways of thinking, acting, and speaking that create suffering. Liberating the mind from suffering is characteristic of all Buddhist schools regardless of the tradition they belong to. However, a difference between a Mahayana Buddhist and another Buddhist practitioner is that individual liberation, individual nirvana, is not the ultimate goal. From a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, all living beings should be liberated from suffering and it becomes essential to help others in this pursuit. Helping others to become free from suffering comes out of a sense of compassion, also called *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* is the term used to refer to this motivation to help all living beings in their path towards liberation, and it was first presented as a teaching by the eighth century Buddhist scholar Santideva in his treatise *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, Bodhisattvacaryavatara*. According to this treatise bodhicitta becomes the central quality in the bodhisattva's path. This is understood as a path to liberation from the kind of emotional and cognitive delusion that leads to suffering. The bodhisattva's path is also motivated by compassion (*maha karuna*) and the aspiration to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. This path opens, according to Santideva, through the cultivation of the perfection of wisdom, or *Prajna Paramita*.

Santideva's approach to ethics involved a path of mental training and mental transformation through meditation and visualization, but equally important in his path is argumentation and action.²³ Santideva's moral thought is a response to suffering. His formulation is not only focused on individual suffering, but also on our insensibility to see the suffering of others or the suffering people inflict on other

²² "Indian Mahayana Buddhism" James Blumenthal, pp. 86-90, in Steven, 2008.

²³ "The Bodhisattva Path: Santideva's *Bodhicaryavatara*", Edelglass, p. 389, in Edelglass and Garfield, 2009.

people.²⁴ This, for him, is caused by the human mind, and it is there that a transformation is required. In the *Bodhicaryavatara* Santideva says “I make this salutation with my hands to those who wish to guard their mind. With all your effort, guard both mindfulness and awareness.(...) When one wishes to move or to speak, first one should examine one’s own mind, and then act appropriately and with self-possession. (...) Realizing this, one should always be striving for others’ well-being. Even what is proscribed is permitted for a compassionate person who sees that it will be of benefit...”

Along with *bodhicitta*, another central idea in the Mahayana tradition is that of skillful means, or *upaya*. This concept can be found in texts such as the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, the *Sutra Unraveling the Thought*, or the *Entrance to Lanka Sutra*. These sutras are attributed to the Buddha but they are not generally accepted by non-Mahayanists as having actually been taught by the historical Buddha.

Another important concept in the Mahayana tradition is that of “emptiness”, or *sunyata*, as a characteristic of people, phenomena, and reality itself. Instead of referring to selflessness, or *anatman*, Mahayana Buddhism considers that emptiness, understood as no-essence, is a more accurate description of the ultimate nature of reality. The idea of no-self would apply to people, whereas emptiness embraces all living beings and reality as a whole.

Mahayana’s two major schools are the Madhyamaka, first articulated by Nagarjuna during the second century, and the Yogacara/Cittamatra, first presented by Asanga and Vasubandhu during the fourth century.

3. Vajrayana²⁵

Vajrayana Buddhism is the philosophy and practice of Buddhist traditions found in Tibet. Vajrayana has its roots in three main pillars: Tantra philosophy; the epistemological traditions of valid cognition or *pramana*, based on Dharmakirti; and the philosophy of Prasangika-Madhyamaka, inspired by Candrakirti.

²⁴ Certain parallelisms could be drawn between a philosophy like Ambedkar’s and Santideva’s. Ambedkar’s Buddhism aims to liberate all members of the society through the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and political action. The bodhisattva’s path does it through the cultivation of bodhicitta, and its active engagement, not only in one’s own, but in the process of liberation of other sentient beings. It is also interesting to notice how Ambedkar is today regarded by some Navayana Buddhists as a bodhisattva. This is explored in section 4.3. Navayana Buddhism and Other Engaged Forms of Spirituality.

²⁵ “Tibetan Mahayana and Vajrayana” Douglas Duckworth, pp. 99-100, in Steven, 2008.

For the Vajrayana tradition, the body as well as the mind are essential in the process of liberation and, whereas other traditions disregard the body, in Vajrayana, the body contains deep wisdom that can be found in all processes of life and death, as all of them are considered part of a grand cosmological narrative²⁶. In general terms, Vajrayana shares with the Yogacara school the constructive role of the mind, and with the Madhyamaka tradition, the universality of emptiness as the ultimate nature of reality.

4. East Asian Buddhism²⁷

East Asian Buddhism is a common term used to refer to the Buddhist schools created out of the reception of Buddhism in China and spread throughout East and Southeast Asia. How Buddhism first entered China is the topic briefly introduced here. However, it is important to keep in mind the vast importance of East Asian Buddhism for many different reasons. First, its impact and number of followers in East Asia throughout centuries. Second, some branches of East Asian Buddhism have also evolved as politically engaged forms of Buddhism since it was first introduced in China. This is particularly relevant for its similarity with Navayana philosophy and its connection with what today is called Engaged Buddhism. Third, East Asian Buddhism was born, in great part, as a political response to the social philosophy of Confucianism and received strong influences from philosophies such as Taoism.

The first records of Buddhism entering China date back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) at a time when political and social institutions based on Confucianism were highly developed. The Han dynasty was characterized as being aristocratic and highly bureaucratic, and its dissidents rejected the social philosophy of Confucianism and embraced philosophical Taoism. Philosophical Taoism not only proposed an alternative type of political organization to the hierarchy of Confucian institutions, but it also embraced meditative practices similar to the Buddhist ones. This common base created a perfect ground to the reception of Buddhism and, when this was first introduced in China, a syncretic movement between Taoism and Buddhism created the foundation for the development and spread of Buddhism in China and throughout East Asia.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 100.

²⁷ “East Asian Buddhism” Ronald S. Green, pp. 110-112, in Steven, 2008.

From its introduction during the Han dynasty and until the Sui dynasty (589-618 CE), Buddhism spread and Buddhist monks became strongly influential in Chinese society. This was seen as a threat by Chinese authorities and it contributed to the persecution of Buddhism. The Sui dynasty, however, honoured Buddhism²⁸ and greatly contributed to creating an approach to Buddhism original to China, less identified with an Indian school of thought. They did this in two ways: From an organizational stand point, Chinese Buddhist monks were organized following a patriarchal system based on Confucian philosophy. From a philosophical stand point, Buddhism in China acquired a positive worldview, based on Taoist philosophy and the influence of Mencius, whose philosophy is based on the idea that human nature is innately good. This is particularly significant for this thesis for two reasons: first, because it contrasts with the Indian notion of *dukkha* or suffering, as the main characteristic of human existence. The second reason is because, as we will see, Ambedkar also embraces Buddhism in more positive terms. Navayana philosophy accepts that suffering characterizes the human experience, but it does not situate it as the origin or foundation of our humanity. The foundation of human nature resides rather in the potential for goodness. Ambedkar situates positive qualities, such as dignity and equality, at the base of what it means to be human, and he emphasizes the intrinsic human potential to create a compassionate society for all members. As we will see in the next section, these similarities may have had an impact in the contemporary development of Engaged Buddhism, with the examples of the Navayana movement in India, or the Order of Interbeing in Vietnam, among others.

1.2. What Is Engaged Buddhism?

We have learned so far that liberation from suffering can be considered the ultimate goal in Buddhism. We have also learned that Mahayana Buddhists add to this the fact that, after reaching this goal, the mission of a Buddhist has not finished but, in a sense, it has barely started. This is because, after attaining enlightenment, a Buddhist practitioner helps others to do the same since, for them, every member of society should be free from the negative states that characterize existence. In this sense, it could be said that, throughout its history, Buddhism and Buddhist practitioners, especially in Mahayana, have ne-

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 111.

ver been separated and immune to the suffering of others. However, in a global context in which human rights and social justice have become key objectives for spiritual and social movements, a new approach to Buddhism, for some, developed in the last century.

In this context, the term “Engaged Buddhism” has been coined to refer to “the application of the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings, to the resolution of social problems.”²⁹ Christopher S. Queen defends the idea that Engaged Buddhism is considered a new *yana*, or new vehicle, as Ambedkar called his Navayana Buddhism when he founded it in 1956. Queen also defends the hypothesis that Engaged Buddhism constitutes the fourth turning of the wheel in Buddhist history.³⁰

For Queen, Engaged Buddhism is characterized by a new type of ethical practice, and this different style would establish a new paradigm of Buddhist liberation. How is liberation accomplished, then, by an engaged Buddhist? What characterizes Engaged Buddhism?

The Buddha taught that liberation from suffering is accomplished through following the Eightfold path, a transformative process of education and self-cultivation to address suffering and to accomplish a full and harmonious life. His ancient teachings describing the path to liberation from greed, hatred, cravings, and attachment have been studied, applied, formulated, and reformulated over the centuries.

Buddhism has become one of the most important spiritual movements in history and has transformed the lives of millions of peoples and societies all over the world. Buddhism has taken roots in different cultures and historical contexts. This ancient philosophy has had a stronger impact in Asia, since its birth in northern India to its later expansion in China, and from there to the rest of East Asia. However, since the last century, a vast exchange between Western and Buddhist philosophy has also taken root. The impact of this exchange can be felt both in the West and in Asia, and new theories and movements that seek social change and liberation have been born under this new light. Navayana Buddhism, as formulated by Ambedkar, may be considered one of them, and Engaged Buddhism, following Queen’s thesis, is a clear example of it. For Queen, Engaged Buddhism brings together the ancient teachings of the Buddha and Western cultural traditions, with “contributions from Judaism, Greek humanism, Christianity, Roman

²⁹ Queen, Christopher S. ed, *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, Simon and Schuster, 2012, p. 1.

³⁰ The hypothesis of Engaged Buddhism being the fourth turning of the wheel will be tackled in Chapter 4, section 4.2.3. Is Engaged Buddhism the Fourth Yana?, and also in the conclusion of this thesis.

and Anglo-Saxon law, the scientific and social Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, and the pragmatism and progressivism of nineteenth and twentieth century America.”³¹

Looking at the radical changes that have taken place in the world since the last century, from the two World Wars, the decolonization processes, to the rapid and wide spread of telecommunications all over the world, it can be appreciated how they have altered the way humanity understands itself and the world. These changes have also profoundly affected philosophical systems and world views, including Buddhism. Living at a time when millions of people can read and learn simultaneously from anywhere in the world, and exchange ideas faster than ever, it is almost impossible for any philosophical tradition to remain intact, and Buddhism is no exception. Different types of political and social organizations and groups are created, people get together, physically or virtually, and share their ideas and insights. The perennial teachings of Buddhism are taught, shared, and practiced by individuals, groups, and societies of radically different backgrounds. Can this affect the way Buddhism understands its ultimate goal?

Among some Buddhist movements, a social dimension seems to have taken special relevance. In this sense, is it possible to continue seeing the individual as the sole “unit” of liberation? Can the scope of the Buddhist understanding of suffering be widened? Suffering that has a cause in the individual, should be addressed at an individual level, but what happens when the suffering comes from a collective or caused by a superstructure? Should this suffering be addressed at a collective or structural level? These are some of the questions that Engaged Buddhism tries to address. Social and political institutions promote suffering or well-being, good or evil, should Buddhism address this type of collective *dukkha* at an individual level as well? Engaged Buddhists situate at the core of their values the importance of liberation at a societal level. This shift has not been exclusive to Buddhism. Other philosophies, religions, and spiritual movements have also been shaken by these new challenges, and by the new tools and technologies at our disposal today.

1.2.1. The Birth of Engaged Buddhism

The birth of Engaged Buddhism is situated by Queen in the decade between 1956 to 1966 in three main events: The first is the mass conversion of Untouchables, from Hinduism to Buddhism, led by

³¹ Ibidem, p.3.

Ambedkar in 1956. The second is the foundation of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka in 1958, which used Buddhist principles to help alleviate rural poverty. The third is the foundation of the School of Youth for Social Service and the Tiep Hien Order (Order of Interbeing) by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and the nun Chan Khong in 1964, during the Vietnam War. The purpose of this order was to rebuild bombed villages, create clinics and farmers' cooperatives, and to promote the end of the war in the West. Thich Nhat Hanh is also credited with introducing the term "Engaged Buddhism" in the 1960s.

Maha Karuna, or universal compassion, is an integral part of any Buddhist path: for example, in the Theravada tradition as a means for a happy life, and in the Mahayana tradition, as a requirement for becoming a bodhisattva. This is a characteristic of Engaged Buddhism as well; but what seems to be a distinct quality of this path is the fact that universal compassion, in Engaged Buddhism, is at the base of a decision to act in society, to take responsibility for the collective suffering, and to take action at a collective level. Stemming from this fundamental quality, according to Queen, socially Engaged Buddhism would have three main qualities: Awareness, identification, and the imperative of action. The first one, awareness, also understood as mindfulness, is the capacity of seeing the interdependence between oneself and the world. The second one, identification, is a sense of empathy for all beings. For engaged Buddhists, this is not only becoming aware of the suffering of others, but also having the capacity to feel what they feel. The third characteristic is the imperative of action. This is understood as the need to take steps in order to be able to eliminate this suffering, at a level appropriate to the cause of the suffering.

Beyond these basic features, there are other essential qualities that can be found in the socially engaged Buddhist movements created in the last decades: A common feature among them would be non violence, following the basic Buddhist precept of not harming others. Another feature is being non hierarchical, as they are based on the belief of the equal dignity of all persons and all sentient beings. A third quality is that they all seem to understand that effective social change requires collective, grass-roots activities, for which Queen calls them "non-heroic" movements.³²

³² Queen, p. 7.

It can be argued that these qualities have been part of Buddhism throughout history, and that all Buddhism is, therefore, Engaged Buddhism. However, it can also be said that there seems to be a clear shift from a type of Buddhism based mostly on personal responsibility and daily mindfulness practices to another type of Buddhism, which includes a personal level, but is also committed to influencing public policies and creating new institutions. Is it possible to engage the mind in overcoming suffering without engaging the world at large in this process? Is it possible to engage in the world for a true change without engaging in mindful practices? According to the Theravada tradition, only the mind, through meditation, can engage and overcome the dynamics of suffering.³³ What Queen and others define as Engaged Buddhism agrees with this idea. It considers the engagement of the mind as a requirement and necessary step to overcome dukkha at an individual level. However, addressing suffering at a social level would also require other types of practices. Meditation and spiritual practices are ways to find wholeness in life and peace within oneself, but a complete process of liberation, from an engaged Buddhist perspective, also involves social action.

1.2.2. Buddhist Ethics

Queen identifies four distinct styles of Buddhist ethics, according to four qualities: discipline, virtue, altruism, and engagement. The first three have been considered part of the Buddhist tradition throughout centuries. However, examples of engagement seem to be found more easily from the nineteenth century on³⁴. *Vinaya*, or discipline, characterized Buddhism from the first communities of men and women who followed the Buddha, avoiding behaviours based on hatred, greed, or delusion. In regards to the second quality, virtue, the commentaries of Atisha, in the eleventh century C.E., *The Lamp of the Path to Enlightenment and Its Explanation*, is an example of the importance of virtuous practices in the Buddhist tradition, especially in the Mahayana and Vajrayana in this case, which had an enormous impact on the spread of Buddhism throughout Asia.

From the quality of discipline, to virtue, to altruism, we seem to experience a shift from more restrictive practices, to those that centre around the concern for others. This can be seen in the bodhisattva

³³ Ibidem, p.9

³⁴ Queen, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, State University of New York Press, 1996. pp. 20-21.

practice of the six perfections, or *paramitas*. Generosity, morality, courage, patience, contemplation, and wisdom are the six perfections that any bodhisattva should develop. The cultivation of these qualities involves a deep concern for others, since liberation from suffering, in the Mahayana path, involves the engagement of all sentient beings. The third quality, altruism, means moving from *concern* for others to *taking action* for the benefit of others; and this step from concern to action is based on a feeling of compassion, or *karuna*. David Chappell's interpretation of the *Upasaka Precept Sutra*³⁵ talks about two types of compassion. The first one is a feeling of sympathy usually limited to those we relate with at a certain moment, so it would be a temporary and circumstantial type of compassion. The second type of compassion is *maha karuna*, "the great compassion" that comes after attaining enlightenment, it is not limited by time or space, and it can help and save an indefinite number of people and sentient beings.

The fourth characteristic, engagement, seems to represent a shift in what has been part of Buddhist ethics so far. The concern and inclusion of all sentient beings in the process of liberation can be found, from the Buddha to today, in all Buddhist teachings. However, what is the impact on Buddhism of today's levels of economic injustice, environmental degradation, and political oppression? What is the impact of the widespread knowledge, through technology, of these collective forms of suffering? We have reached levels of interconnection and communication never experienced before; this availability of information and communication technologies cannot be found in other periods of history. Wouldn't these change the way social suffering is addressed? Wouldn't these conditions radically alter the way spiritual traditions and social movements address the psychological, social, political, and economic challenges faced today? Engagement, added to the other three Buddhist qualities described above, could be of great help when answering these questions.

Queen addressed some of these issues, comparing the figures of Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar in their spiritual and political attitudes. Both were contemporaries and faced with the same challenges in the India of their time. Gandhi advocated for compassion towards the Untouchables, and for the improvement of their social conditions. Ambedkar, advocated not only for understanding their situation and the introduction of some improvements in their lives, but for the abolition of the caste system as a whole.

³⁵ David Chappell, pp. 351-75. Queen refers to it in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, p. 15.

Ambedkar advocated for a structural change, a change that would shake the core of the Indian institutions. Gandhi did not initially advocate for the suppression of the caste system. Ambedkar saw the caste system itself as an expression of the greed, hatred, and delusion of the Hindu system and the colonial legacy. For him, it was possible to eliminate those products of suffering, because they were brought about by a collective action, institutionalized for thousands of years. For Ambedkar, if collective actions and institutions have created them, other collective actions and institutions can remove them. This radical change also involved a training of the mind, but only as a necessary step that would prepare towards the ultimate objective of social liberation. Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism, for some, is considered a perfect example of Engaged Buddhism because Engaged Buddhism, like Navayana Buddhism, is directed precisely towards the "creation of new social institutions and relationships."³⁶

1.2.3. Engaged Buddhist Practices and Buddhist Schools

Examples of socially engaged practices can easily be found throughout Buddhist history: During the third century BCE, in the public work projects of the Indian king Ashoka; during the Sui and T'ang periods in China, in the free hospitals, dispensaries, and tree-planting campaigns of the Buddhist temples. As Robert Aitken Roshi puts it: "Here and there in Buddhist history we find millenarian individuals devoting themselves to social welfare and social protest, but generally the practice of enlightenment, social or individual, was focused within the monastery and among monks. We do not find Buddhist social movements developing until the late nineteenth century, under the influence of Christianity and Western ideas generally."³⁷

It may be defended that Engaged Buddhism constitutes a new *yana*, or vehicle, a different Buddhist school, along with Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. But what arguments could be provided to say that Engaged Buddhism is a new Buddhist school, as important as these three main schools that have dominated Buddhist thought for hundreds of years?

³⁶ Queen, *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, p. 17.

³⁷ Robert Aitken Roshi was a Zen teacher and one of the founders of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Queen extracts this quote from *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984, p. 164.

Queen approaches Engaged Buddhism and the formation of yanas throughout the centuries in three different ways.³⁸ First, by comparing Buddhism and Christianity, in particular when comparing the birth of Mahayana Buddhism, on one hand, and the Protestant Reformation, on the other hand. There seems to be similarities in both processes; for example, both constituted a way to be open to new ideas and to a different form of approaching those not initiated. In the case of Buddhism, this process happened around four hundred years after the death of the Buddha, whereas Christianity underwent these dramatic changes fifteen hundred years after the death of its founder.

The second way Queen approaches the creation of each new Buddhist school is through the concept of *paradigm*, as formulated by Thomas Khun in his classical work, *The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions*. He was also inspired by the ideas of the Swiss theologian Hans Kung, who used the Khunian model to interpret and compare the evolution of both Christianity and Buddhism. Understanding each school through the concept of paradigm, the novelties that each school introduces would constitute an evolution in the whole Buddhist philosophical system. At the same time, with this model, each school would have brought a different paradigm. This allows us to compare each one as a whole, each one at the same level, and not falling into the idea of one school being better or more complete than the other.

Queen's third approach is based on the idea of coexistence. Although each new school brings changes and evolution, what predominates from this perspective is a type of harmonious coexistence of each school, the old and the new, with their similarities and their differences, learning from one another. Each main school with its countless subbranches, different ideas and practices, without so many boundaries and constrictions, learning from each other in a common path.

1.2.4. Engaged Buddhism as a New School

For some, Navayana Buddhism was the first of a wave of Buddhist movements that started in the second half of the twentieth century. These new movements have in common the characteristics described in this chapter. For some, they also constitute a new approach to Buddhism, to the point that they are thought to have created a new major school, the fourth one, Engaged Buddhism. The fact that this is sug-

³⁸ Queen, *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, pp. 18-22.

gested and defended by some scholars is an indication of the impact that this new approach to Buddhism is having. These same scholars consider Ambedkar one of the founders of this new movement and, for the purposes of this thesis, this is key. Ambedkar was not originally a Buddhist, but he saw in Buddhism the potential for the type of transformation he thought was required. Buddhism was born in India, and people from India could embrace it as part of their own culture and tradition. At the same time, Buddhism shares certain similarities with the universality and all-embracing ideas of humanism and social justice found in some Western traditions that Ambedkar was so influenced by.

Some may argue that Engaged Buddhism is not a new school, and that social practices have always been part of Buddhism. It could be said, for example, that a Buddhist meditator, in the act of meditating, reconnects him or herself to the larger community of living beings, and engages in a process of healing and change. Furthermore, there are many Buddhist practices and themes that can be considered socially engaged actions and concepts: interdependence, mindfulness, compassion, skillful means, walking meditation, or right livelihood. Others argue that there is a new type of sensitivity about the sources of human suffering that were not previously central to Buddhism. Sensitivity to social injustice, political oppression, and the importance of institutional and structural changes to bring suffering to an end. Whether Engaged Buddhism is or is not a new school, is open to debate. What seems to be clear is, that a group of new ideas has been impacting Buddhism in the last decades; and that Ambedkar's new approach to Buddhist philosophy has had a central role since its inception. But for now, I hope this chapter brings a broader view of where Ambedkar's social philosophy could be situated within the different Buddhist schools and movements. Let us now continue with a closer analysis of Navayana Buddhism, its context and purpose, and Ambedkar's influences in the elaboration of his new social philosophy.

2. Navayana Buddhism: Context, Purpose, and Influences

2.1. Navayana Buddhism: Context and Purpose

2.1.1. Ambedkar's Life and His Conversion to Buddhism

Ambedkar's foundation of Navayana Buddhism in 1956 can be seen as the result of a life dedicated to political action, learning, and social transformation. He was probably one of the most highly educated people in India in his time; quite an achievement considering that Ambedkar was a member of the lo-

wer castes, and then only the second Untouchable in India's history to complete high school.³⁹ The historic mass conversion of 1956, which included Ambedkar's own conversion to Buddhism, was the culmination of a process of twenty-one years of study of Indian history and philosophy, as well as other Asian, European, and North-American traditions. This long process that ultimately led to Ambedkar's conversion could not be fully grasped without understanding, at the same time, his approach to political change. Adopting a new faith usually involves a deep individual change, but at the same time, it requires a different way of relating with the world around. For Ambedkar, Buddhism gathered these elements, but it could also become a propeller of action and transformation, bringing what for him would be Nibbana on earth. He embarked in this twenty-year long process with the ultimate purpose of finding a faith to mobilize and liberate the Untouchables and to change their situation in the Indian society.

2.1.2. Ambedkar's Three Main Questions

In this search, Ambedkar seemed to be particularly concerned with three questions. First, how liberation would take place; that is, should liberation be understood as an event that takes place once a person dies? Does liberation take place after a process of detaching from the world's concerns? Or does it happen in this world, through social and self-transformation? A second purpose we find in Ambedkar's search regards to the idea of suffering in Buddhism. Ambedkar brought a different interpretation from the one found in the Buddhist tradition, of both the source of suffering and the way to eliminate it. In his interpretation, ideas such as social oppression or political involvement would take centre stage. One last concern we find in Ambedkar's study is in regards to the veracity of the Buddha's message. Ambedkar, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, provided a set of principles that would allow any reader to distinguish the Buddha's actual message from elements that could have been incorporated later by other sources. Ambedkar clearly expressed his concern about Brahmanic principles being introduced as the Buddha's words with the intention of blurring the lines between Brahmanic and Buddhist philosophy. My hypothesis is that he made this claim, not so much out of concern for the veracity of the Buddha's original words, but as a response to the oppression that lower classes, and Dalits in particular, had suffered under a caste system

³⁹ Queen, Christopher S. "Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism", pp. 132-150. In Jondhale, S. and Beltz, J.(eds.) *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*.

based on Brahmanism. Ambedkar, in pointing at this hypothetical manipulation of Buddhism by Brahmanism, could provide a justification for his new Buddhist approach, find a place for the Navayana Dhamma in the Buddhist landscape, and give a new impulse to the Dalit movement in India.⁴⁰

2.1.3. Why did Ambedkar choose Buddhism?

Ambedkar's decision to adopt Buddhism was motivated by reasons and ramifications that go beyond what may be appreciated at first sight. Why did Ambedkar choose Buddhism? Why did he abandon a Hindu identity assigned by birth to embrace Buddhism? An immediate answer may be that he did it in order to lead the way in the transformation and uplifting of the lower classes. This was certainly his main purpose. But what features does Buddhism possess that, according to him, give it the potential to transform both the individual and the society? Ambedkar's study of philosophical and religious traditions included not only Buddhism, but also others, including Christianity and Islam. The fact that Buddhism was born in India was definitely a powerful reason to choose it. However, Ambedkar also studied other Indian-born religions, such as Sikhism or Jainism. What did he see in Buddhism that set it apart? According to Pradeep Gokhale,⁴¹ Buddhism gathers four distinct features that made it stand out from other spiritual traditions, which Ambedkar highlights throughout *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. The first one is that Buddhism emphasizes the role of reason. The second one is that it rejects the belief in certain objects, such as God and soul, accepted by the majority of religions. Third, Buddhism did not accept the caste system⁴². And lastly, for Gokhale, Buddhist morality is not based on the idea of a God or gods; it is based on human and sentient beings, and their search for a good life.

2.1.4. A New School of Buddhism

⁴⁰ Some saw Ambedkar's approach to the Buddha's words as suspicious and dangerous. For example, an English Buddhist monk and member of the Maha Bodhi Society who reviewed *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in *The Maha Bodhi*, India's main Buddhist journal at the time, called it a "dangerous book for beginners (...) for he preaches non-Dharma as Dharma for motives of political ambition and social reform." (Queen, p.136)

⁴¹ Gokhale, P. "Universal Consequentialism: A Note on B.R. Ambedkar's Reconstruction of Buddhism with Special Reference to Religion, Morality, and Spirituality" in *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, pp. 120-131.

⁴² Some have questioned that early Buddhism rejected the caste system. In this regard, the articles by G. Ellis and Y. Krishan in the bibliography can be illustrative of this perspective.

It was during the mass conversions of October 1956 that Ambedkar laid out the foundation of his new school: He announced the creation of a “nava” “yana”, a “new vehicle” for the delivery of the Buddha’s message. Ambedkar’s main concern, however, was not to transform Buddhism, but to bring out an essence apparently lost throughout the years. An essence that, considering Ambedkar’s own reading, would bring light to one of the Buddha’s forgotten teachings: his social message and its potential for, not only individual, but societal transformation. It could be said, then, that Ambedkar brought about a social philosophy that included ideas not commonly recognized within the Buddhist tradition, and left out others commonly accepted by Buddhists. Ambedkar, through his philosophy, brought the Buddha’s message into a new light and expressed it in a way that could become the vehicle to channel the concerns of the lower classes in India.

2.1.5. Characteristics of Navayana Buddhism

The strong social message that Navayana Buddhism brings is accompanied by distinct features. These features could be better understood by considering some of the philosophical legacy of the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century: secularism, rationality, social justice, equality, and free thought. For Gokhale, Navayana Buddhism is characterized by four main features⁴³: The first one is a secular and materialistic approach. For him, this means that its spiritual practices are focused not so much on the individual and a relation with a divinity, but ultimately on the improvement of the society. From a materialistic perspective, Navayana Buddhism, for example, would accept the idea that there is a relation between consciousness and the body, in which the arising of consciousness is connected with the body: both are understood as interconnected, and the birth of one would accompany the birth of the other. The second distinct feature Gokhale finds in Navayana Buddhism is a scientific rationality that considers experience and reason as part of the Buddhist approach to the relation between the individual and reality. The third characteristic is anti mysticism. For him, Navayana Buddhism would not accept mystical elements as part of its analysis and practices.⁴⁴ The last one is a shift in the idea of morali-

⁴³ Gokhale, pp. 120-131.

⁴⁴ Gokhale claims as part of Ambedkar’s anti mysticism a rejection of meditation and meditative concentration. However, as we will learn throughout this thesis, Ambekdar saw the training of the mind as one of the most important tenets in the Path of Righteousness and in the achievement of Nibbana.

ty. According to Gokhale, Ambedkar sees Buddhist's morality as based on human relations, and not in the relation between men and God. Men are situated in the centre of morality, and morality is at the centre of the Buddha's Dhamma. Morality in other religions would centre around the idea of God and the soul. For Ambedkar, however, it would be autonomous, that is, it is for men by men; it would not depend on an external entity like God, and it would involve all humankind. Navayana morality also understands the law of karma in secular terms. This means that good actions have good consequences and bad actions have bad consequences, but always in regards to this lifetime, not past or future lives. Past lives and their effects on the present are rejected by Navayana Buddhism. Gokhale calls this type of ethics "universal consequentialism".

2.1.6. A New Balance Between Religion and Science

A most significant aspect of Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism is, therefore, that it unites the search for social transformation with a rational understanding of reality, and it brings a new type of balance to the relation between science and religion. In this sense, it could be said that Ambedkar had a double purpose with *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. On one hand, he was bringing a message of hope for the future. His work would be an inspiration and a point of reference for Dalits and for anyone searching for social transformation. On the other hand, he wanted to bring a new approach to the Buddha's teachings. This approach, based on science and critical thinking, would address certain tenets of the Buddhist Dhamma that he saw as problematic. Ambedkar himself stated what he found these problems to be in the introduction of his work:⁴⁵ For him, the first one was the Buddha's *parivraja* and why he decided to leave his home and become a wandering mendicant. The second one refers to the Four Noble Truths. In this regard, he questioned if they were formulated by the Buddha the way they had actually been passed down throughout the different traditions, or if there had been a reinterpretation introduced by other sources that would ultimately alter the Buddha's message. The third one refers to the doctrines of the soul, karma, rebirth, and nibbana. The last tenet Ambedkar found problematic in the traditional Buddhist Dhamma is the

⁴⁵ Fiske, A. And Emmrich, C. "The Use of Buddhist Scriptures in B. R. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in Jondhale, S. And Beltz, J. (eds.) *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*.

role attributed to the *bhikkhu* in the sangha and society.⁴⁶ These are all core elements of Buddhist thought that Ambedkar saw as problematic. Because of this, it could be said that rather than being a new Buddhist school, Navayana Buddhism establishes a social philosophy based on Buddhist thought.

2.1.7. Focus On The Ethical and The Social

The fact that Ambedkar chooses to address these problems instead of other aspects of the Buddha's Dhamma suggests the type of philosophy he wanted to create: a philosophy that focuses on the ethical and social, in which the removal of human suffering is addressed both at an individual and at a collective level. This new philosophy would speak to the concerns of the lower castes, of which he himself was part. Ambedkar's life itself was an example of improvement and transformation, which he envisioned for other Untouchables as well.

For Ambedkar, education would play a key role in this process. In regards to how important education was in his life, Tartakov⁴⁷ talks about Ambedkar as "a member of a community persecuted by Brahmanical Hindus as ritually impure and literally polluting by touch (...) he and his family had to battle social sanctions that kept him segregated and persecuted by continual physical humiliation throughout his life (...) Reading and writing represented for him not only a useful skill but a major material triumph and the potential hope of his entire community to withstand and overcome Brahmanical persecution. Indeed, it was the chief tool with which Ambedkar was to defend his community and have an impact on modern Indian society second only to Mohandas Gandhi's"⁴⁸. In this sense, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* was not only written for the Dalit community, but for all Indians and, ultimately, a global audience. Ambedkar was the leader of the Dalit movement in India, but he was also the draftsman of the new Indian constitution, and one of the most important political figures of his time. He was educated both in India and abroad, and his sources were both Indian and international. It is significant that he decided to write *The*

⁴⁶ For its philosophical implications, this thesis focuses on Ambedkar's second and third problems: the Four Noble Truths and the doctrines of the soul, karma, rebirth, and nibbana.

⁴⁷ Tartakov, G.M., "The Navayana Creation of the Buddha Image", in Jondhale, S. And Beltz, J. (eds.) *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, pp. 151-185.

⁴⁸ Ambedkar also emphasizes as an essential part of the Buddha's Dhamma that education and learning must be open to all, as opposed to Brahmanism, which excluded Shudras and women from even gaining basic literacy. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 153.

Buddha and His Dhamma in English. His message had a clear universal imprint, addressed to modern India and beyond.

2.1.8. Universalism Versus Nationalism

This universal message that Ambedkar wanted to bring was in clear opposition to what Brahmanism represented at this time. According to Gail Omvedt,⁴⁹ during the nineteenth century, the Brahmanic Hindu tradition underwent a transformation that interpreted religion in terms of nationalism. Hinduism was understood as the religion of India, and the Indian national identity was seen in terms of Hinduism. According to Omvedt, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi were clear examples of this. Both of them saw Hinduism as the national religion of India, therefore, conversion to another religion would be seen as antinational. Hinduism, for them, belonged also to the Untouchables, therefore, their situation could be improved within Hinduism. In contrast, Ambedkar saw Hinduism as a philosophy and religion that had brought inequality and oppression; one within which a dignified identity could not be sustained. In *Annihilation of Caste*,⁵⁰ one of the main questions addressed by Ambedkar is whether Brahmanism could be reformed in a way that all members of the Indian society could feel represented with dignity and equality. What Ambedkar was ultimately asking is what type of society Indians wanted to live in, and what the future of the country should look like. For him, a reformation of Hinduism would never happen, and Untouchables, therefore, needed to look for a religion that would provide a new identity; an identity that would allow them to break their chains, to emancipate from the oppression that Hinduism had subjected them to. Buddhism, for Ambedkar, could do this. Buddhism was equalitarian, universalistic, and compassionate. Buddhism was also an Indian religion, but it would provide the foundation for an identity not based on a nation, but based on universal moral values, such as equality and rationality. Buddhism, for Ambedkar, represented the highest ethical values of India's past. Buddhism could play an essential role in writing India's future.

⁴⁹ Omvedt, G. "Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism: Dr. Ambedkar's Sociology of Religion and Indian Society" in Jondhale, S. And Beltz, J. (eds.) *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, pp. 49-62.

⁵⁰ Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste*. London, Verso, 2014.

For Ambedkar, all societies go through different stages. He addresses this in “Philosophy of Hinduism,”⁵¹ in which he talks about how the evolution of societies is intrinsically intertwined with the evolution of religion. For Ambedkar, the transition between societal stages is determined by “religious revolutions.” An “antique” society would see God or gods as the “father” of their nation or tribe, and as the provider of moral values. In this stage, national identity is defined in terms of religion. Revolution in an antique society would take place when God turns to be seen, not as the provider of national identity, but as universal, not associated with a particular country or nation. Revolution in an antique society also involves a change in how morality is understood. In an antique society, morality would be based on this father-figure God, as the provider of moral values. Revolution happens when morality turns to be based on justice for the individuals, it is seen as equalitarian and universal, and it does not subordinate groups within the society.

This type of transformation, which involves the idea of God and morality, for Ambedkar, was a type of “internal revolution”, which changes societies from the inside. But there were also “external revolutions,” which transform societies from a kind of outward movement. According to Ambedkar, this type of revolution had taken place in the previous four hundred years, with the introduction of secularism and scientific thought. How could this deep transformation take place in the Indian society? For Ambedkar, Buddhism could have the potential to bring both, an internal and an external revolution. His new philosophy would embrace science, secularism, equality, and justice for all. Buddhism had this potential, and Navayana Buddhism could become the tool to “create a true community for Dalit(s) and for Indians as a whole.”⁵² Buddhism was a universal and rational religion that would support a just society.

2.2. Philosophical Influences of Ambedkar’s Buddhism

2.2.1. Indian Tradition, Buddhist Philosophy, and Western Thought

Navayana philosophy and its approach to Buddhism was only possible thanks to Ambedkar’s knowledge of the Indian philosophical tradition as well as Western, and other Asian philosophies. For

⁵¹ Ambedkar, B. R. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*. Volume 3: *Philosophy of Hinduism; India and The Pre-Requisites of Communism; Revolution and Counterrevolution; Buddha or Karl Marx*. Bombay, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979.

Omvedt refers to “Philosophy of Hinduism” in “Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism.”, pp. 49-62.

⁵² Omvedt, pp.49-62.

Pradeep Gokhale, Indian philosophical systems⁵³ have traditionally developed through the work of creative authors and thinkers who have tried to discover “the hidden meaning of original texts.” Gokhale sees Ambedkar as one of these innovators; a creative thinker who would bring social transformation by creating a new approach; a philosophy that would unearth the Buddha’s original social message in light of a modern perspective. This, however, is a common claim of reform movements within religions, the claim of going back to an “original” message. It can be, however, a way of validating what are in fact new ideas, as in this case, in which Ambedkar creates a new social philosophy founded on Buddhism.

For some, Buddhism is part of a tradition of critical inquiry and innovation. Throughout history, different Buddhist schools have interpreted and reinterpreted the Dhamma. Principles and ideas that some have considered central to the Buddha’s teachings, others have situated in a secondary positions. In this sense, Ambedkar’s questioning of the Four Noble Truths, for example, or his reinterpretation of Nibbana, could well be seen as part of this tradition of critical examination and transformation. This character of Buddhism has helped it to be part of a rich exchange of ideas, not only among the different Buddhist schools, but also among other religions and philosophical traditions. Navayana philosophy, however, is considerably more radical, than any previous change. For example, Ambedkar gathered in it principles such as fraternity, liberty, and equality, which may be more representative of the Western tradition, as well as the scientific thought of the last two centuries. This rich conjunction of ideas that Navayana represents can be seen partly as the result of Ambedkar’s own life. His twenty-year learning process of Indian Buddhism and world religions, as well as his involvement in Indian intellectual movements were strongly influenced by his years in England and the United States, one of whose results was the foundation of Navayana philosophy.⁵⁴

For Ambedkar, Buddhist philosophy was characterized by a tradition open to questioning, the interpretation and reinterpretation of their own teachings, and the cultivation of a free mind. In this sense, principles like free thought, highly valued by Ambedkar, would become easily part of the Navayana ap-

⁵³ Gokhale, Pradeep P. ‘Universal Consequentialism’, in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Betz, Eds., *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004, pages 120-31.

⁵⁴ Fiske and Emmrich.

proach to reality. At the same time, his world vision, influenced by Western thought, and American pragmatism in particular, could be welcomed by the Buddhist tradition, which is usually characterized by openness rather than orthodoxy.⁵⁵ Ambedkar's years of study of Buddhism could be illustrated in his personal library of approximately two hundred and fifty volumes of Buddhist history and literature.⁵⁶ His Buddhist sources came from Asian philosophers such as Suzuki, Takakusu, Murti, G.B. Gokhale, or Lakshmi Narasu. However, Ambedkar also studied Buddhism through Western authors, who would give him a quite different approach to the Buddha's teachings.

2.2.2. Non-Buddhist Sources

According to Tartakov,⁵⁷ Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism had two major non-Buddhist sources. The first is the Western liberal thought based on the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The second was the Indian culture of the previous two centuries. Western philosophy clearly had a great impact on Ambedkar's thought. One of his major influences was that of John Dewey, who was his professor during the years at Columbia University. Especially inspiring for Ambedkar were Dewey's ideas on social improvement, democracy, and the importance he attributed to acquiring democratic skills and the development of democratic institutions. Ambedkar agrees with Dewey on the potential of leaders and communities to transform their lives without the need to search for any type of divine intervention: People and communities have the innate potential to forge their own future through self transformation and education. This would clearly have an impact on many of Ambedkar's ideas, for example on the importance attributed to the role of the individual in what he called "the training of the mind" for both individual and social change and, ultimately, liberation.

Dewey also influenced Ambedkar's interpretation of the doctrine of Karma. As we will learn in more detail in the next chapter, Ambedkar questioned the Brahmanic understanding of Karma. According

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Queen, C. "Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism" in in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Betz, Eds., *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004, 132-150.

⁵⁷ Tartakov, G.M. "The Navayana Creation of the Buddha Image", in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Betz, Eds., *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 151-185.

to it, Karma would leave imprints of past lives in the soul, which are carried on to next lives and determine a person's present situation. These imprints determine what caste a person is born in, which cannot be changed through any type of action in the present life. This means that actions today determine the caste a person is born in their future life, but don't have an effect on the caste they currently belong to. Brahmanism, according to Ambedkar, has used this to justify inequality, discrimination, and violence towards lower classes. Dewey's influence on Ambedkar's understanding of Karma may be seen in his article "Annihilation of Caste."⁵⁸ In it, Ambedkar used a passage of Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, which describes, quite opposite to the Brahmanic doctrine of Karma, how the present, and not the past, determines someone's life: "An individual can live only in the present. The present is not just something which comes after the past; much less something produced by it. It is what life is in leaving the past behind it."⁵⁹ The present is a product of the present; the past, and much less, past lives, could never be used to write someone's present. Life is what happens in the present, and transformation is only possible through living in the present.

Another important influence on Ambedkar's approach to Buddhism was the German scholar of Indology, Hermann Oldenberg. His work *The Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*⁶⁰ seemed to have partly influenced Ambedkar's questioning of the Four Noble Truths. This work was written as a result of years of research on early Buddhism, in particular the Vinaya Pitaka which, at the time, had not yet been widely studied among European academic circles.⁶¹ For Oldenberg, the Buddha's original message referred to human suffering from a collective rather than an individual perspective. The change of stress from the Buddha's original approach to a more individualistic one would have come from the monastic communities that preserved the Dhamma. According to Oldenberg, in their rewriting of the Buddha's teachings, they reformulated them to stress individual responsibility rather than social, as the cause of human's cravings and ignorance. This would give the individual the full responsibility for their

⁵⁸ Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste*. London, Verso, 2014.

⁵⁹ This quote is also used by Queen in his article "Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism."

⁶⁰ Oldenberg, Hermann. *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*. London, Williams, 1882.

⁶¹ From the *Hermann Oldenberg* entry on www.encyclopedia.com

suffering, with no regard for external conditions controlled by governments or institutions, which could eventually be transformed through collective action.⁶²

2.2.3. Buddhist Sources

In regards to his major Buddhist influences, Tartakov refers to two major ones: The first ~~one~~ is the Sri Lankan renewal of Buddhism that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth century. According to Tartakov, this revival of Buddhism was deeply influenced by the theological patterns of Western Christianity, which would have a major impact in Sri Lankan society during that time. The second major Buddhist source in Ambedkar's Navayana reformulation was the Indian thinker P. Lakshmi Narasu. Narasu was a pioneer in the modern Buddhist movement of colonial South India, and published *The Essence of Buddhism* in 1907.⁶³ Narasu may have been Ambedkar's main influence in his choice of Buddhist texts, in particular in his choice of the English translation of the Theravada canon of Sri Lanka. Narasu may have also been the strongest influence in Ambedkar's rational approach to Buddhism. For Narasu, as well as for Ambedkar, rationalism should be the guide when interpreting the Buddhist tradition, and not so much a specific type of practice or traditional exegesis. Another major influence that Narasu had on Ambedkar was his reformulation of the doctrine of Karma. As we have learned, for Ambedkar, the Brahmanic interpretation of Karma is used to blame lower classes for their situation, and also as a tool to view their suffering as punishment for wrongdoings in past lives. The idea of a soul plays a key part in this understanding, because it is through the soul that a person's rebirth is determined. On the other hand, Narasu's approach to the doctrine of Karma rejected the idea of the soul, and incorporated modern science and rationalism, particularly contemporary Physics and Biology. For Ambedkar, Narasu's understanding of Karma does not promote passivity or a blaming mentality, as Brahmanism would do, but encourages each

⁶² Oldenberg's influence on Ambedkar's interpretation of the Four Noble Truths is pointed out by Queen in his article "Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism."

⁶³ This work was republished by Ambedkar in 1948.

individual to see themselves as part of a larger whole, with responsibility towards themselves and each other.⁶⁴

- **Ambedkar's Hermeneutic Principles⁶⁵**

We have previously learned about the possibility of monastic communities altering the Buddha's social message. Ambedkar clearly expressed his concern about this, since he saw the potential that Buddhism had for social transformation. This was one of the reasons why Ambedkar formulated three principles to distinguish the Buddha's original teachings from what could have later been introduced as part of his Dhamma. According to Queen, for Ambedkar there were two sources of inspiration when formulating these principles. From the traditional Buddhist literature, two texts may have had a major impact on him: the Kalama Sutta, and the Maha Parinibbana Sutta. The Kalama Sutta stresses the importance of relying on a person's own experience and judgement, rather than on external authority. The Maha Parinibbana Sutta gathers the Buddha's last words, interpreted as an encouragement to discover the truth through the light of reason and experience. A second source of inspiration for Ambedkar's hermeneutic principles may have come from Satkari Mookerjee and his work *The Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux*, published in 1935. One of Mookerjee's main ideas used by Ambedkar in his hermeneutic principles is understanding the Buddha as a rationalist. One of Mookerjee's outstanding passages, highlighted by Ambedkar, is the following: "From the very beginning Buddhism has been critical in its spirit. Lord Buddha was an intellectual giant and a rationalist above all else. He exhorted his disciples to accept nothing on trust."⁶⁶

- **Theravada and Mahayana**

⁶⁴ Queen, in his article "Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism", pointed out this dimension of Narasu's influence on Ambedkar's thought. From Narasu's *The Essence of Buddhism*, he quotes: "No Buddhist will deny that everything is under the sway of causality. Unless we regard all mankind as linked together as parts of one universal whole, we cannot perceive the full significance of the doctrine of karma. Not only are the murderer and the thief responsible to society, but society is equally responsible for breeding such characters." (Ahir 1989: 238)

⁶⁵ Ambedkar's Hermeneutic Principles are analyzed in more detail in Chapter 3, section 3.5.

⁶⁶ This quote is used by Queen in his article "Ambedkar's Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism."

Lastly, Ambedkar would have seen Navayana philosophy as influenced by both the Mahayana and the Theravada schools, as he explicitly highlighted in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. For him, his new philosophy would accept as pillars both wisdom and compassion, and would balance the principles that each school separately stresses. For Queen, Navayana philosophy gathers the great virtues represented by the main Buddhist schools: moral and mental cultivation, *sila* and *samadhi*, both conduct and concentration, morality and mindfulness. For Ambedkar, these principles were represented throughout his life in his aspirations for social and political change as well as in placing education and critical thinking as the foundation for a free and equal society.

2.2.4. Karl Marx

Ambedkar's interest in Karl Marx's thought can be seen, not only in his article *The Buddha or Karl Marx*⁶⁷, but throughout his work, and also in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

In this work, Ambedkar usually portrays the Buddha as compassionate towards the labourers and poor people he encounters on his path. He is depicted as empathetic towards animals and nature as well. He sees that the constant conflict among men is derived from the greed, hatred, and ignorance that characterize their relations. The caste system, created and supported by Brahmanic Philosophy, is a result of this greed, hatred, and ignorance in men. For Ambedkar, conflict between classes, or class struggle, shouldn't be exclusively used in the Marxist tradition. Class struggle, for him, is a reality that characterizes human relations whenever they are based on greed, hatred, and ignorance. Therefore, taking the steps to overcome these types of relations would mean, not only entering a different type of Buddhist path, but also the beginning of the end of the caste system.⁶⁸

The concept of "class struggle" is, therefore, a key element in his analysis of the social conditions of the lower classes in India; but it is seen now from a new light. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, the Buddha is portrayed as a social reformer. This term, "social reformer" is explicitly used by Ambedkar. First and foremost, the Buddha's main purpose is to find out the reasons for human suffering and the way

⁶⁷ Ambedkar, B.R., *The Buddha or Karl Marx*, from www.Ambedkar.org.

⁶⁸ Fiske, A. and Emmrich, C. "The Use of Buddhist Scriptures in B.R. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma*" in Jondhale, S. And Beltz, J. (eds.) *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*.

to eliminate them. For Ambedkar's Buddha, the main cause of human suffering can be found in the inequality caused by societal structures; therefore, these societal structures would need to be changed. In order to do this, both an individual and a collective process of transformation are required. However, an important issue should be raised in this point. Many religious, moral, and social philosophies seek to alleviate suffering, as Buddhism does. If Ambedkar locates the causes and remedy of suffering in the same place that Marx does, some may say that Navayana is basically Marxist philosophy under the guise of Buddhism. This is because what distinguishes Buddhism from other religions or social philosophies is not that it wants to remedy suffering, but its precise diagnosis of what causes suffering and what will relieve it, which Ambedkar radically transformed. This is a justifiable claim, and Ambedkar himself recognized the role of Marxist philosophy, and Communism in particular, in the fight for the rights of lower classes around the world. I think, however, that his philosophy owes more to the legacy of the European Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Concepts such as "class struggle" and a common concern for creating an equal society, are key aspects that both Marx and Ambedkar share. However, Ambedkar's approach goes beyond this, and embraces more fully a tradition that gives it the foundation, not only in his fight for the rights of the lower classes, but equally importantly, to create an Indian society that is compassionate, free, and inclusive for all. A society that would bring not only material equality, but also values such as critical thinking, fraternity, and freedom. Ambedkar himself says:

"Carlyle" in reference to the nineteenth-century British philosopher "called Political Economy a Pig Philosophy. Carlyle was of course wrong. For man needs material comforts. But the Communist Philosophy seems to be equally wrong for the aim of their philosophy seems to be fatten pigs as though men are no better than pigs. Man must grow materially as well as spiritually. Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation, which was summarized by the French Revolution in three words, Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no

value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one, but not all.”⁶⁹

This way of the Buddha that Ambedkar refers to, encompasses important elements of the Buddhist tradition, but also introduces the essential values of fraternity, liberty, and equality, values that, for him, would transform the Indian society from its core. Navayana philosophy was elaborated with this foundation and, even though it fundamentally provides the tools for the fight of the lower classes, it ultimately aims to give the framework for a transformation of the Indian society as a whole.

Omvedt⁷⁰ points out another important difference that can also be appreciated in Ambedkar’s words: the role that spirituality in general, and religion in particular, play in societal transformation and growth. Marx brings a radical critique to how religions shape the individual and society. For Ambedkar, however, as we learned, certain religions, and Buddhism in particular, had a potential to bring positive change and deeply transform any society. As we have just read from Ambedkar himself, for him, a religion such as Buddhism could help to bring the so-much-sought liberation of humanity that Marxism, through other means, had tried to find but failed.

Despite these differences between Ambedkar and Marx, we can say, in conclusion, that their points in common are clear: In addition to the crucial role of the concept of “class struggle” in Ambedkar’s thought, both seek to empower the lower classes of society and search for ways to liberate them from the oppression and injustice they suffer. Both of them understand liberation as a means to a greater process. And they both seem to understand liberation as a means for the liberation of all of humanity and, as a consequence, a way for humanity to reach a higher stage of evolution.

3. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*: Elements of Analysis and Innovation

⁶⁹ Ambedkar, Ibid.

⁷⁰ Omvedt, Gail. “Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism: Dr. Ambedkar’s Sociology of Religion and Indian Society” in Surendra, J. and Beltz, J. *Reconstructing The World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, pp. 49-62.

As we have just learned, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*⁷¹ is the result of a rich interweaving of philosophies and cultures. It was published in 1957, shortly after Ambedkar's death in December 1956. As the last of his works, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* gathers a legacy of a lifetime dedicated to the study of the Indian philosophical and political traditions whose result is Navayana Buddhism as a new social philosophy. In this study of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, my purpose is to focus on Ambedkar's approach to the Buddha's teachings. It is an approach that takes from the old and from the new; that learns from the tradition but, at the same time, sets clear boundaries with what, for Ambedkar, could not be accepted in a free and compassionate society. This chapter brings an analysis of some of the most important ideas introduced by Ambedkar in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. The difference between the old and the new are not always clear. However, it is important to remember that the main purpose of Ambedkar's work is to set the foundations for a society based on dignity and equality. Therefore, whether an element is an innovation was not as important for Ambedkar as to make sure that it brings about the social transformation he desired.

3.1. The Two Main Questions

Any account of the Buddha's life usually begins with the life of Siddharth Gautama and his life-changing choice of leaving his home and becoming a wandering ascetic. Ambedkar's recounting of the Buddha's life, however, is quite different. The story of a young prince, overly protected by his family, who decided to learn about the world and to embark on an individual quest of meditation and self discovery, is brought to life in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in a quite unusual way. For Ambedkar, the accounts of an apparently spoiled life of a prince, isolated from the world and its concerns, didn't seem

⁷¹ Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma are the editors of the first critical edition, published in 2010, which is being used for this thesis. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is considered by some one of the most important Buddhist writings in the twentieth century. When Ambedkar died, the book was finished, but he died before he could polish and complete the work for a final publication. Certain elements, like citations or a bibliography, were not incorporated by Ambedkar, and Singh and Verma's critical edition finally completed these tasks. To this scholarly work, this edition also brings many elements of reflection. Singh and Verma bring many topics and ideas that are relevant, not only for this thesis, but for the future of Navayana Buddhism in the broader scope of both modern Buddhism and Indian Philosophy. Some of these key topics are the relation between Navayana Buddhism and Liberation Theology, as well as Navayana Buddhism as part of the Engaged Buddhist movement. Other essential questions they bring are the place where Navayana philosophy is situated in the Buddhist tradition as well as the regard of Ambedkar as a reformer of the Buddhist tradition. Another topic of great importance is the influence that the Western tradition has in contemporary Buddhism, being Navayana philosophy an example of this.

credible or even realistic. These accounts, as in other religious traditions, were really never meant to be realistic accounts, but rather were meant to convey something about the tragic character of the human condition. Ambedkar was aware of this, but he also wanted to bring a different account. Ambedkar's presentation of Siddharth Gautama's life portrays the formation of a new type of leader; a leader concerned with the political and social affairs of his community and his time. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* was written with the intention of setting the foundations for a new social philosophy, as well as a different approach to Buddhism, one in which political and social concerns are considered cornerstones. A different type of Buddhist path was being opened, one that regards social and institutional change as intrinsic parts in the process of liberation. Ambedkar's philosophy, we will see, does not disregard the individual dimension. However, this is reinterpreted in a way that includes a political dimension, as well as a social message that, for Ambedkar, had not been recognized as part of the Buddhist tradition before.⁷² Traditional accounts of the Buddha's life, had ignored this part of Gautama's life which, for Ambedkar, was a cornerstone of Gautama's early years.

We have previously learned that Ambedkar's intention was not to write a historical text, but to create the scriptures of a new politico-spiritual movement. However, it is important to highlight that Navayana Buddhism is formulated as recuperating the Buddha's original message. Precisely because of this, Ambedkar claimed that the traditional accounts of Siddharth Gautama's life were not always credible. As we learned in the previous chapter, Ambedkar claimed that both the accounts of the Buddha's life and his original message had been manipulated, possibly by Buddhist monks or Brahmins who, for him, had their own interests in portraying a Gautama detached from social concerns, like the caste system. Ambedkar did not provide any evidence to support this claim. However, his purpose was to justify the introduction of a social message in the Buddha's Dhamma; and he did so by asserting that the Buddha's original teachings may have very well being altered when they were written down or passed on, so that other accounts were introduced, making them indistinguishable from the original message of the

⁷² This, we have learned, has raised questions about Ambedkar's accuracy and supporting evidence, and it is a legitimate point made by many to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Of special relevance in Ambedkar's interpretation of the Buddha's original teachings is section 3.5. Ambedkar's Hermeneutic Principles.

Buddha.⁷³ When Ambedkar provides this approach, his ultimate intention is a political one, to serve the purpose of Dalit emancipation and social liberation. For that reason he wanted to make sure that his followers had all the tools to defend this particular version of the Buddha's life and teachings. And that is why he created a specific methodology with principles to distinguish the Buddha's message from what he claimed-were later introductions. Some scholars called these "Ambedkar's Hermeneutic Principles", referred to in the previous chapter and analyzed in more detail in section 3.5.

Who then was Siddharth Gautama in the Navayana account? Ambedkar presents a young man involved in the political affairs of his time who, at a crucial moment in his early political life, finds himself at a crossroads: he needs to choose between war and peace, between violence or non-violence, or *ahimsa*. His choice of ahimsa brings him to a first realization, the realization of the root of suffering. For Ambedkar, however, the root of human suffering turns from the individual to the collective. Based on this need to choose between war and peace, between violence and ahimsa, Siddharth Gautama understands that the cause of suffering lies in conflict, the never-ending conflict that has characterized human relations. Human relations are seen, however, not so much from an interpersonal perspective, but rather in a collective way, from the perspective of social class. "The problem of war is essentially a problem of conflict (...) The conflict between nations is occasional. But the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all sorrow and suffering in the world."⁷⁴ This realization is key in the development of Ambedkar's new approach to Buddhism. Suffering as a fundamental tenet of human existence is clearly present. However, he situates the suffering caused by the conflict between classes at the root of suffering in the world. This brings a whole new approach to the future Buddha's Dhamma.

In the previous chapter we analyzed the concept of class conflict in Marx's theory and in Ambedkar's philosophy, and how he introduces it, from a different approach, in Navayana Buddhism. From a Marxist perspective, throughout history, the development of societies has always taken place as a result of class conflict. However, from a non-Marxist perspective this historical claim is evidently questionable.

⁷³ This same claim can be done, and has been done to Ambedkar's portrayal of the Buddha: The construction of a narrative to serve the purpose of Dalit emancipation and social

⁷⁴ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 41.

Ambedkar, we learned, thinks that the concept of social conflict should not only be appropriated by the Marxist tradition because he sees it as part of the human condition. Through Navayana Buddhism, he wants to bring a solution to this problem, the problem of social conflict, one that goes beyond traditional Marxism or traditional Buddhism. Ambedkar then, through the voice of Gautama, gives himself the task of finding a solution to the problem of human suffering, caused by the constant conflict between classes.

He also seems to bring, through Gautama's life, a mirror of his own life which he dedicated, both politically and intellectually, to the study and transformation of the Indian society. Ambedkar was born a Hindu, but the societal structure and the sets of beliefs the Hindu system created seem to bring conflict, suffering, and discrimination to large parts of the Indian population, particularly to those born Untouchables, as Ambedkar himself was. At a crucial moment in his life, he announced he had been born a Hindu, but he would not die a Hindu. From that time on, he dedicated his life to the elaboration of a framework that creates a new identity for the Untouchables, and which sets the foundations for a new Indian society.

In a similar way, Gautama takes a first step to find a solution to the constant conflict he sees, and he embarks on the study of different philosophies, old and new, how they faced this problem, and what answers, if any, they give to it. In a similar way as Ambedkar did, when studying philosophical systems, Gautama focuses on the Indian philosophical tradition, both the old and the contemporary. From the Vedas to the Jain leader Nigantha Nathaputta, Ambedkar analyses how the different Indian traditions tackled this question. It is in the Brahmanic Philosophy, however, where many of his answers are found. This philosophy, therefore, becomes the central focus of analysis and criticism. It could be said that the Buddha's new Dhamma is born from the desire to radically change the structures created after centuries of predominance of Brahmanic Philosophy in the Indian society.

Navayana Buddhism is usually presented as opposed to certain practices that have commonly belonged to the Buddhist tradition, such as meditation and the training of the mind. However, a close analysis of Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* shows, not only an acceptance of these types of practices, but the crucial role they play in Gautama's transformation and in the whole Navayana Buddhist system. Ambedkar's Buddha begins his quest through the training in Samadhi Marga, or concentration of

the mind. The fruit of this work is the Buddha's enlightenment, which initiates his new path.

Enlightenment in this context means reaching a deep realization. The Buddha's first realization brings him a deep learning about human existence. Traditionally, this has been presented as the Four Noble Truths, but in Ambedkar's account, the Buddha formulated two questions instead: "What are the causes of suffering and unhappiness which an individual undergoes?" and "How to remove unhappiness?"⁷⁵

For this controversial passage Ambedkar uses the *Majjhima Nikaya* and for his interpretation, he was highly influenced, as we learned in the previous chapter, by the German scholar Hermann Oldenberg. Through this new version of the Four Noble Truths, Ambedkar radically transforms the Buddha's message and purpose, and it becomes one of the keys in Navayana philosophy.

3.2. The Cause of Suffering

Ambedkar's presentation of the Buddha's enlightenment experience turns the traditional Four Noble Truths into two inquiries: What is the cause of human suffering and unhappiness, and how to remove them. Arguably, Ambedkar does not actually reject the Four Noble Truths, but instead compacts their teachings into two key questions that, on one hand, prepare for self inquiry and the study of social relations and, on the other hand, prepare a person to take action and find a solution. On Ambedkar's reading of his life, the Buddha gives himself the difficult task of answering these questions, and so Ambedkar compels anyone who enters the Navayana path to ask themselves about them too. The search for answers would bring not only a transformation of the self, but a call to action to change the society. At the same time, Ambedkar reflects through the Buddha the way he proceeded in his own life: the Buddha becomes a mirror of his own life. Finding a solution for the situation of the Untouchables was his objective, and for that, he also embarked on the study of the philosophical traditions of India. Through his political action, he learned what his contemporaries said about these questions, and the solutions they gave to them.

There are two sections in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* dedicated to explaining the Buddha's learning process about the previous and contemporary philosophical traditions: "The Buddha and His

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 49.

Predecessors” and “The Buddha and His Contemporaries.”⁷⁶ The Buddha’s “predecessors” refers to four schools of philosophy: Vedic Philosophy, Sankhya Philosophy, Brahmanic Philosophy, and Upanishadic Philosophy.⁷⁷ According to Ambedkar, these four schools were well established during the Buddha’s time, and were considered the “ancient philosophies” of India. The Buddha’s “contemporaries” refers to what Ambedkar sees as the five main philosophers of the Buddha's time, whose study provides him an understanding of their teachings and a depiction of their intellectual context. These contemporary philosophers and doctrines are: The doctrine of amoralism, by Purana Kassapa; the doctrine of fatalism and determinism, by Makhali Ghosal; Ajit Kesakambal, considered a precursor of the Charvaka school, and defender of ideas on materialism; Sanjay Belaputta, proponent of the sceptical Ajñāna School of thought; and Nigantha Nathaputta, ascetic and Jain philosopher.

Of the four ancient philosophies, Sankhya Philosophy, in Ambedkar's account, had a strong influence on the Buddha’s thought and it sets the foundation for a rational and fact-based approach to the Buddha's social analysis. For Ambedkar, Sankhya Philosophy influenced the Buddha through three ideas. The first is the acceptance of rationalism as the basis of the thinking process. The second is the view that there is no logical or factual base for the belief in God. The third is the existence of *dukkha*, or suffering, in the world.

Ancient and Medieval Indian philosophies had traditionally found six means to acquire knowledge. These means are called *pramanas*, which literally translates as “proof” or “means of knowledge.” Although they changed through time and schools, the most accepted ones were perception, inference, testimony of reliable sources, analogy, postulation, and negative proof. According to Deutsche,⁷⁸ Sankhya epistemology accepts three of these six *pramanas* as the only reliable sources of knowledge: perception, (*pratyaksa*), inference (*anumana*), and the testimony of reliable sources (*aptavacana*). Ambedkar is particularly interested in emphasizing what he saw as the role of Sankhya Philosophy in the Buddha’s learning process during his early years. The influence of the philosopher

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 52-60.

⁷⁷ These are not what most contemporary classifications define as the classic Indian schools, but it is the one Ambedkar provided in his organization of the Buddha’s intellectual context.

⁷⁸ Deutsche, pp. 245-248.

Kapila and Sankhya philosophy on the Buddha, however, has long been debated. There are recent studies⁷⁹ which, without denying similarities between Kapila's and the Buddha's ideas, find the influence of Kapila on the Buddha no more significant than that of other philosophers of his time. Muller, for example, addresses this question as follows:

“At first sight it might seem as if the very first aphorism of Kapila - namely, ‘the complete cessation of pain, which is of three kinds, is the highest aim of man’ - was merely a philosophical paraphrase of the events which, as we saw, determined Buddha to renounce the world in search of the true road to salvation. But though the starting-point of Kapila and Buddha is the same, a keen sense of human misery and a yearning after a better state, their roads from the very first diverge so completely and their goals are so far apart, that it is difficult to understand how, almost by common consent, Buddha is supposed either to have followed in the footsteps of Kapila, or to have changed Kapila's philosophy into a religion.”⁸⁰

However, for Ambedkar, it was important to emphasize this influence on the Buddha. As we have just learned, the epistemology of Sankhya philosophy is based on three of the six classical pramanas. Ambedkar focused on two, inference, and perception, as these are the tools that would be more effective in his opposition to what he saw as superstitions. For him, the Buddha learned from Sankhya that either perception or inference should be used to support any argument. Using this framework, Buddha, first, found that neither the Vedic nor the Upanishadic principles could be supported, as they are not based on logical or factual proof. Therefore, Ambedkar's Buddha rejects them as valid foundation for a solution to the existential problems of humanity. For Ambedkar, however, Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy are not the only ones whose principles should be questioned as unreliable. Inference and perception should also be used to oppose Brahmanism, the philosophy that, for him, holds the key to the cause of unhappiness and suffering. Ambedkar's analysis of its underlying structure provides the foundation of the new Navayana Dhamma and the Buddha's alternative to transform human existence.

⁷⁹ Such as those of the scholars Max Muller and W. Woodhill Rockhill, who further analyzed this influence in their works *Studies on Buddhism* and *The Life of the Buddha and The Early History of His Order*, published in 1999 and 2000 respectively.

⁸⁰ Muller, p. 10.

For Ambedkar, Brahmanic philosophy sets the foundations of the caste system, a social system based on the strict division of people into castes. Castes are given by birth and determine the type of livelihood, social relations, education, and most aspects of a person's life. They are organized in strict hierarchy, which is also related to economic status and the enjoyment, or not, of basic human rights, many of them banned for the lower castes. Lower castes suffered violence, oppression, and discrimination, for centuries under this social system, and they still suffer it to this day. This social system was established before the Buddha's time and, on Ambedkar's analysis, is based upon Brahmanic philosophy. Its study brings the Buddha the most important insights to answer the two fundamental questions about human suffering and how to overcome it.

As we can see, Ambedkar's Buddha learns that Brahmanic philosophy sets the foundation for social inequality, and it is this inequality the root of conflict, which is ultimately social conflict. Here lies the cause of human suffering. Therefore, dismantling Brahmanic philosophy is essential to overcoming this suffering and to take the steps on the Navayana path to liberation.

3.2.1. Brahmanic Philosophy⁸¹

Brahmanic Philosophy takes a special place in Ambedkar's revision of the Buddha's life and his analysis of ancient philosophies, since its impact in Indian society is the deepest and longest of the schools he presented. Let us see what, according to Ambedkar, are the basic tenets of Brahmanism. This will bring a better understanding of Ambedkar's account of the Buddha's criticisms of this philosophy, his response to it, and the new Dhamma he elaborates.

For Ambedkar, Brahmanic Philosophy is based on four theses. The first is the idea that the Vedas, or main Hindu religious texts, are sacred and infallible, that is, they cannot be questioned. The second thesis is that the salvation of the soul is only possible through the performance of Vedic sacrifices. The third is the doctrine of Karma; this doctrine, in Brahmanism, is part of the theory of the transmigration of the soul. Transmigration of the soul refers to the process the soul follows in *samsara* when, after death, it

⁸¹ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 55-57.

moves within the body of a newborn. The fourth thesis, Chaturvarna, is the one that has the strongest impact in the Buddha's analysis and rejection of Brahmanism.

According to this philosophy, there is an ideal society, established by a pattern called Chaturvarna. This pattern is unquestionable and is based upon five rules: The first rule is that society should be divided into four classes. The second is the rule of graded inequality. This rule establishes that there cannot be social equality among the four classes. The third rule is based on the division of occupations; this refers to the idea that each class is assigned a different occupation, which cannot be questioned or changed. The fourth rule of Chaturvarna refers to the right to education; two groups are banned from this right: women and Shudras, the lower class in this social system. The fifth rule refers to the stages that any person should go through in order to have a fulfilling life. Neither Shudras nor women are allowed to go through any of these stages.

These basic tenets of Brahmanic Philosophy had a strong impact during the Buddha's time. In fact, its influence expanded for thousands of years before and continued on over the centuries, to the extent that the Indian society of the twentieth century, the one in which Ambedkar was a contemporary, was still organized according to these same unquestionable patterns. The impact this has on Ambedkar's thought is at the root of his development of Navayana philosophy. For this reason, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, many of the Buddha's ideas are presented in contrast with Brahmanism. I will focus on the analysis of the Buddha's response to Chaturvarna and the Brahmanic Doctrine of Karma. Chaturvarna and its rule of graded inequality is analyzed in its connection to the Four Noble Truths and the Buddha's search to find the root of human suffering. The Doctrine of Karma, for Ambedkar, was instrumentalized by the upper classes with the sole purpose of perpetuating Chaturvarna.

Ambedkar's Buddha's, therefore, strongly rejects the four theses of Brahmanic Philosophy: The first thesis, the infallibility of the Vedas, because supporting the idea of infallibility of any text would mean the denial of freedom of thought. He rejects the second thesis, the need for sacrifices for the salvation of the soul, for a number of reasons. In the first place, the Buddha rejects the existence of a soul, Ambedkar points out; therefore, there wouldn't be a need to save it. But this rejection is also based on the fact that the sacrifices performed by Brahmins, for Ambedkar's Buddha, are not real sacrifices. These

sacrifices are mere artifice, they are superficial, and they don't have a true impact on a person's life or on society. A true sacrifice, for the Navayana Buddha, is based on denying the self for the good of others.⁸² The individual dimension is again intertwined with the collective. Taking "the other" into consideration, feeling their needs, and acting for the betterment of someone else's life, becomes central in the Buddha's rejection of Brahmanism and his new approach.

The third thesis the Buddha rejected, according to Ambedkar, is the law of Karma, as formulated by Brahmanism. It is important to point out that Ambedkar does not reject the law of Karma itself. As we will see in later sections, the law of Karma is actually one of the foundations of the Navayana Dhamma. However, Ambedkar's Buddha rejects Karma as presented by Brahmanic Philosophy. This rejection is based on two main reasons. The first is its erroneous foundation on a doctrine of the soul. The second reason is that, for Ambedkar, Brahmanism turns the law of Karma into an instrument of Chaturvarna, that is, an instrument for the perpetuation of the caste system. He, therefore, rejects Chaturvarna, as an unjust system based on the rule of graded inequality. For Ambedkar, understanding Chaturvarna is essential because he considers it the soul of Brahmanic Philosophy.⁸³ In fact, Chaturvarna is at the root of the perpetual conflict that permeates society, because of the hatred it produces among classes.

It should be remembered⁸⁴ that, for Ambedkar's Buddha, the root of suffering lies in the conflict between classes. It should also be remembered that, in Ambedkar's reinterpretation of the Four Noble Truths, there are not four truths but, rather, two essential questions: "What is the cause of human suffering and unhappiness?" and "how to remove them?" Therefore, the Buddha's study of Brahmanic Philosophy has in fact brought him the answer to these questions: if the rule of graded inequality is what

⁸² In 3.6., The Theory of Anatta, we will tackle in more detail Ambedkar's idea of self. As we explained in Chapter 1, Buddhism is founded on the rejection of the self as a continuous existent entity, either in past lives or in the present. We will see later that Ambedkar does not translate *anatta* as "no-self", but as "no-soul", because this translation is the one that serves him to better oppose the Brahmanic theory of karma. When we say that Navayana Buddhism accepts the denial of the self for the good of others, here "self" should be understood not so much as the one denied by Buddhism, but as denial of individual desires in order to serve other people. He does this to oppose the Brahmanic concept of "sacrifice" as opposed to Ambedkar's understanding of it.

⁸³ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 58.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, in the section "The Problem in a New Perspective," p. 41.

causes perpetual conflict between classes and the conflict between classes is the root of suffering and unhappiness, in order to put an end to them, graded inequality needs to be eliminated. This idea is the key to the Buddha's new Dhamma.

Navayana philosophy is, therefore, founded in the rejection of a system, an unjust system that brings inequality and suffering. However, Brahmanism is an infallible and unquestionable philosophical system so, how would it be possible to change it or amend it if it is based on unquestionable tenets? If it establishes a "divinely ordained social order"? For the Buddha, as presented by Ambedkar, this social order is opposed to a "true way of life". In the Buddha's quest, however, in order to truly remove human suffering and unhappiness, this social order should be brought to an end.

Brahmanism had a profound impact in the Indian society, to the extent that it established unquestionable societal structures and it made any kind of social change almost impossible when it comes to the improvement of the situation of the lower castes, and in particular of Shudras and women who, we have learned, are situated at the bottom of the Brahmanic ideal society. Navayana Buddhism was born as a response to this. Brahmanism is an ancient philosophy, thousands of years old. However it still had a deep impact in the societal structure of Ambedkar's time. His study of the past provided him with the foundation to understand what, for him, were the root causes of the inequality and violence suffered by many. His purpose was to transform his society and to set the foundations for a new India. That is why he presents his philosophy in a way that, on one hand, helps to create a new conscience to address the problems of modern India. On the other hand, Navayana Buddhism, for Ambedkar, incorporates two elements to the Indian Buddhist tradition: first, the recent scientific discoveries mostly, as we will see later, in the areas of Physics and Biology. Navayana Buddhism also incorporates concepts usually associated with Western philosophy, such as the idea of fellowship and the principle of free thought.

During the Buddha's time, the infallibility of the Vedas or the belief in the salvation of the soul were common among the population. The Buddha's teachings were born out of this historical context but, at the same time, they questioned and broke with many of the traditions and beliefs then held. What are some of these common beliefs that Ambedkar's Buddha explicitly rejected? He rejected the idea of a soul, God, and therefore, the theory that God created man. He rejected speculation and nihilism, a fatalistic

view of life, and the idea that life is predestined by God. He rejected the theory of transmigration and the doctrine of *moksha* or salvation. This situates the Buddha, and Ambedkar, in a quite controversial position for his time. But this also gives him the perfect place to present his new Dhamma.⁸⁵

These ideas are the starting point of the Navayana Dhamma, and Ambedkar elaborates this doctrine by bringing a radically different viewpoint of them. This is the foundation of Ambedkar's new approach and its philosophical innovations. Navayana philosophy is based on a strong rejection of Brahmanism, but it is also based on the acceptance of those elements that can bring equality and happiness, as well as a rational and scientific approach to human existence. Navayana Buddhism accepts the Law of Cause and Effect, but it rejects a fatalistic approach to it, as well as the idea of predestination. Navayana Buddhism accepts the Law of Karma. However, it rejects the idea that acts committed in past lives can produce suffering in the present, and that the present is determined by the past and it cannot be altered. Navayana Buddhism, therefore, rejects a fatalistic interpretation of the Law of Karma and it replaces it with a more scientific view of it. Navayana Buddhism accepts the doctrine of re-birth, but from a novel perspective. We will see, this doctrine of re-birth substitutes for the Brahmanic theory of transmigration. Navayana Buddhism also accepts the doctrine of Nibbana, but presented from a different approach, replacing the Brahmanic doctrine of *moksha*, or salvation. Lastly, Navayana Buddhism accepts the role of the mind and its centrality in a person's life. In fact, for Navayana Buddhism, any societal transformation needs to begin with the transformation of the mind. As Ambedkar's Buddha says, "the mind is the fount of all the good and evil that arises from within and befalls us from without."⁸⁶

3.3. The Three Paths to The End of Suffering⁸⁷

Ambedkar transformed the Four Noble Truths into two main questions. The answer to the first question, what is the cause of suffering and unhappiness, comes from an analysis of Brahmanic

⁸⁵ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 61-62.

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 63. Here Ambedkar follows the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, in particular, the *Dhammapada*, most of whose passages are dedicated to the path to liberation.

⁸⁷ The Buddha delivers his message of the three paths to remove suffering during his First Sermon to the three Parivrajakas. This can be found in the chapter "Campaign of Conversion", pp. 64-117. The two Nikayas that Ambedkar used for this section are the *Majjhima Nikaya* and the *Samyutta Nikaya*. Aakash Singh also refers to them in his critical edition of *The Buddha and his Dhamma*.

Philosophy. For him, the root of human suffering lay in the social conflict derived from the inequality of the caste system, which dehumanized entire segments of society. What is Ambedkar's Buddha's answer to the second main question: How to remove suffering from human existence? The traditional Buddha's prescription to end suffering is given in the Fourth Noble Truth, which provides the set of principles to reach enlightenment, the Eightfold Path. In the same way, Navayana Buddhism has its prescription for how to remove suffering and unhappiness, which comes through a threefold path. During the First Sermon, the Buddha answers this essential question, explaining how to embark on this path; but he also presents the postulates and purpose of his new Dhamma, a group of teachings the three Parivrajakas recognize as a new school of thought. In the same way as the Buddha, in the Navayana account, is recognized as the creator of a new school, Ambedkar himself presented this Navayana teachings during the mass conversions of 1956. He did not want to engage in distinctions between the different traditional schools, Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, but to create a philosophical framework and a new social movement.

Ambedkar's presentation of the Navayana school is part of the chapter "Campaign of Conversion." This chapter initially presents a Buddha at a crossroads about his own life. After having one of his deepest realizations about human suffering, he needs to make a decision. He needs to choose between dedicating his life to perfecting himself, or dedicating it to both perfecting himself and changing the world. This is Ambedkar's call to action. In his approach to Buddhism, there is not an individual path, because human transformation involves engagement with the world. The transformation of the individual goes hand in hand with societal transformation. Ambedkar's Buddha feels a sense of responsibility towards the other. He realizes that with so much unhappiness in the world, it is wrong not to do anything about it. If something can be done, it is a person's duty to do it.

The Buddha's doctrine, as Ambedkar presents it, is characterized by the qualities of love, ennoblement, equality, and truth, and its aim is to reach a Nibbana of a different kind. This Nibbana is accomplished by teaching "the path of reason", "the middle way", "the law of righteousness" and "the peace of Nibbana"⁸⁸. Enlightenment is accomplished through love, kindness, and fellowship with others.

⁸⁸ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 125.

This last element, fellowship, is particularly relevant, because it involves working with others, in terms of equality, to bring the kingdom of righteousness to its realization. This means that the Navayana Buddhist practitioner engages and organizes with others so that they can find the best way to do this, both at an individual and at a collective level.

Navayana philosophy has clear influences from the Christian tradition and the European Enlightenment, but it is rooted in Ambedkar's study of the history of India. The use of the term "the kingdom of righteousness" is a good example of how Christian elements impacted Ambedkar's approach⁸⁹. His appreciation for the European Enlightenment is clearly present in his reference to "the path of reason" as well as in the idea of fellowship. The path of reason is, for him, the essential way to emancipate from all superstition. For him, Brahmanic philosophy is founded in beliefs that darken a person's mind. These beliefs prevent a person from seeing the realities of the unequal and violent society Brahmanism created through Chaturvarna. These beliefs also prevent them from seeing the potential all individuals have to transform their own lives. Emancipation from superstition, by following the path of reason, is key to creating critical thinkers and a modern society.

Another important aspect of Navayana philosophy is to bring both women and the Untouchables to a place of dignity. In order to do this, Ambedkar presented a Buddhist path in which there is no discrimination between men and women or the outcast of society. This can be connected to Ambedkar's theory of the origins of Untouchability in India, gathered in his work *The Untouchables*, published in 1948. In this theory, Ambedkar defends the idea that the first Untouchables in India were actually Buddhists who, during the Brahmanical revival of the fourth century C.E., were pushed to marginalized

⁸⁹ Two examples from the New Testament of references to righteousness and the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of righteousness, can be found in Matthew's Gospel: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" The Gospel of Matthew, 5:20. "Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The Gospel of Matthew, 5:10.

areas of the villages. Ambekdar presents these early Buddhists as the outcast of society; a marginalization that, through Chaturvarna and the institutionalization of the caste system, was perpetuated for centuries.⁹⁰

The Navayana Dhamma is based on two postulates: Its first postulate is the “relation of man to man”. A social dimension of the Buddha’s Dhamma takes, therefore, a central role. Men are not alone in their suffering. The kind of relation they establish in society determines their lives, their suffering, and their happiness. In the same way, men are not alone on their path to liberation. It is together that humankind can transform their lives and create the type of society that removes greed, hatred, ignorance, and violence among their members.

The second postulate of the Navayana Dhamma is the fact that men are currently “living in sorrow, misery and poverty.” These are conditions established by the relations that men themselves have created. It is the societal structure that determines this life of sorrow and poverty. Now the question becomes “how to remove suffering?”⁹¹ How to change this situation that requires both a change of consciousness and a transformation of society? In Navayana Buddhism, suffering, misery, and poverty are removed by following three paths: the Path of Purity, the Path of Righteousness, and the Path of Virtue. This is Ambedkar’s transformation of the Eightfold Path, which is now turned into a threefold one. This threefold path gathers some of the traditional Buddhist teachings, but presented in a way that serves the purposes of the Navayana approach. For Christopher Queen,⁹² through the Path of Purity, Ambedkar introduces the traditional Five Buddhist Precepts; the Path of Righteousness is equivalent to the Eightfold Path; and the Path of Virtue brings the Ten Paramitas. Although the three paths are necessary to remove human suffering, Ambedkar focuses on the Path of Righteousness, the Eightfold Path. The traditional Eightfold Path shows the way to liberation from suffering, the path to Nibbana. The purpose of the Navayana Path of Righteousness shows this way too. However, the type of liberation that Ambedkar

⁹⁰ Zelliot, E. “B.R. Ambedkar and the Search for a Meaningful Buddhism”, in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz, *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, pages 18-34. Aakash Singh also uses this reference to in his edition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, page 66.

⁹¹ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, page 67. This is based on the *Samyutta Nikaya* V: 421:3.

⁹² Queen, Christopher, S. ‘Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation’, in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (eds.) *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Albany: SUNY, PP. 45-72.

envisions gathers some specific tenets that make the Navayana approach to Nibbana a rather different one. But in order to get there, the three paths need to be walked, beginning with the Path of Virtue.

The Path of Virtue comprises what Ambedkar calls “the principles of life.” These principles act like a compass and set a specific standard by which a person could determine how they are conducting their lives: whether in a way that promotes life, or in a way that promotes death, hatred, and violence.

The Path of Righteousness, *Ashtanga Marga*, is identified with the Eightfold Path. Of its eight constituents, Navayana Buddhism focuses especially on two: *Samma Ditti* and *Samma Samadhi*. *Samma Ditti*, or Right View, consists in the training of the mind, a kind of training whose aim is to allow the mind to be free. The objective of this training is the destruction of *Avijja*, or ignorance. Ignorance here means the belief in any kind of superstition or supernaturalism, and any kind of doctrine not based on facts or experience. *Avijja* also refers to the veil that prevents people from seeing the actual structures of society, structures that perpetuate inequality and conflict. To accomplish *Samma Ditti*, to see this clearly, one must have a “free mind and free thought.”⁹³ For this, Navayana Buddhism highlights the importance of ideas such as the use of reason or freedom of thought.

Samma Samadhi is the second most important constituent of the Path of Righteousness. *Samma Samadhi* is a state beyond concentration. In Navayana Buddhism, *Samma Samadhi* becomes a training of the mind that allows it to think positive actions and thoughts; but this is only a first step. Once the mind is habituated to thinking positive actions and thoughts, to think of the good, it would then have the power to also do good. This idea of *Samadhi* here is very different from the one traditionally understood in Buddhism. *Samadhi* is the last of the elements in the Eightfold Path and it is usually understood as one-pointed concentration. This is also different from the practice of *dhyana*, which is more a state of equanimity and mindfulness towards the senses.⁹⁴ None of these are exactly what Ambedkar is referring to when he talks about *Samadhi*. He understands it as a training of the mind that specifically allows one

⁹³ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, page 71.

⁹⁴ Wynne, p. 140.

to become a compassionate person, who does good in society, and ~~it~~ relates in a positive manner with other people.

Ambedkar clearly emphasizes a positive approach to Buddhism: the recognition of the suffering of the world is just a first step towards the equally important recognition of the possibility of its removal. Inequality can be removed by creating the circumstances that allow the flourishing of all humanity. This positive approach to Buddhism makes the Navayana's approach quite distinct from other schools: it is possible to remove this suffering, and anyone walking on the path has the responsibility for both individual and social transformation.

A key tenet of Navayana Buddhism is, therefore, that the Eightfold Path presented is not interpreted so much as a means to Nirvana,⁹⁵ as it would, for example, in the Theravada tradition, but as a way to “remove injustice and inhumanity” caused by the actions of men.⁹⁶ Scholars like Queen see Ambedkar’s Path of Righteousness as the social turn of the Eightfold path that Ambedkar gives in Navayana Buddhism. For Queen, a clear example can be found in Samma Samadhi which, we have just explained, is not only defined as the habit of the mind to think good, but also as a “necessary motive power to do good.”

The Path of Virtue is identified with the Ten Paramitas, or States of Perfection.⁹⁷ In Ambedkar’s approach, four of the ten take a particular turn.⁹⁸ *Prajna*, or wisdom, is understood as a kind of rational quality that allows one to act virtuously.⁹⁹ Rationality, therefore, and not superstition, is at the core of hu-

⁹⁵ Ambedkar’s theory of Nirvana is explained in section 3.9. of this thesis, The Theory of Nibbana.

⁹⁶ Queen, pp. 45-72.

⁹⁷ In Buddhism, paramitas or perfection usually refer to a set of practices conducive to the state of Buddhahood. Buddhahood is the goal in the Mahayana path and is accomplished when reaching awakening; this allows to help others on their path to liberate themselves from suffering. The idea of “perfections” developed after the Buddha’s death and the specific number has widely varied throughout history and schools. “A set of six perfections became common (...) and developed into a standard list in a number of Mahayana sutras. The six are generosity (*dana*), morality (*sila*), patience (*ksanti*), vigor (*virya*), concentration (*dhyana*), and wisdom (*prajna*). This list was expanded to complement the ten stages (*bhumi*) traversed by a bodhisattva in the course leading to full Buddhahood. The additional perfections are skill-in-means (*upaya-kausalya*), resolution (*pranidhana*), strength (*bala*), and knowledge (*jnana*).” Apple, 2012.

⁹⁸ Queen, pp. 45-72.

⁹⁹ For Queen, *prajna* is identified as the understanding and intelligence that motivates and rationalizes all acts of virtue.

man relations. *Dana*, generosity, and *Karuna*, compassion, are directed towards the suffering of the poor. There is, therefore, a recognition of social inequality, and the need to address it by the cultivation of these two paramitas. Furthermore, *Maitri*, or loving-kindness, is understood as fellowship, which becomes now the foundation for human relations. Fellowship requires seeing the other as an equal; it is a type of compassion that requires the removal of any kind of hierarchical structure. Its implementation, therefore, destroys the graded inequality established by Chaturvarna, the core of Brahmanism.

Ambedkar's purposes is to create a new philosophical framework that would bring a new type of consciousness. This type of consciousness, supported by a Buddhist approach, would help to transform the situation of the lower classes: Equality, compassion, and fellowship would become the cornerstones of a new and fair society. In Ambedkar's account of the Buddha's First Sermon, the Parivrajakas announce a new Dhamma never seen in history. And the Buddha is presented, not only as a spiritual teacher, but also as a social reformer,¹⁰⁰ a person who brings an original message to create a deep moral and social change in the world.

The Threefold Path presents, therefore, three cornerstones of Navayana Buddhism. The first is the idea that the root of human suffering is the domination of men by men. Following the Path of Righteousness, Ambedkar's version of the Eightfold Path, eliminates this type of relationship and, therefore, the root of suffering. The second is the role of *Maitri* and *Prajna* in the Path of Virtue, especially *Maitri* understood as fellowship, which now plays a central role. Lastly, Ambedkar differentiates the Navayana Dhamma from a message of pessimism. The Buddha's Dhamma is not pessimistic: The recognition of the existence of suffering is always followed by a message of purpose and hope.

3.4. The Buddha's Teachings

Unfolding from these three cornerstones lies the heart of the Navayana Dhamma, which Ambedkar structures around four distinguished topics: The role that the Buddha plays as a spiritual teacher and leader, and the differences between him and other religious leaders. The new Navayana Dhamma, in which the theories of Nibbana and Kama stand out as some of its main innovations. The third topic focuses on the elements rejected by the Navayana Dhamma, such as the idea of God or of the soul,

¹⁰⁰ *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, p. 75.

which I call “the eight boundaries of a new Dhamma.” The fourth topic is Saddhamma, or the Philosophy of Dhamma. For Ambedkar, three features become central in his new philosophy: the quality of Pradnya, the quality of Maitri, and the social message of his teachings. Let us analyse these topics in further detail.

3.4.1. The Role of a New Spiritual Leader

In 1935 Ambedkar delivered a speech in which he announced that if Dalits ever wanted to live in equality and dignity, they should leave Hinduism. And as a Dalit himself, he would not be part of a religion which denies humanity, lacks compassion, and denies respect for basic human rights.¹⁰¹ For more than twenty years, Ambekdar studied Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. Ambekdar also studied what type of leadership these spiritual traditions represented. Buddhism seemed to bring a sense of equality among its members, as well as a spirit of inquiry. This played an essential role in Ambedkar seeing this tradition as a propeller of social transformation and motor for change.

For Ambedkar, this type of leadership that sets Buddhism apart from other religions can be clearly appreciated when comparing the figures of Christ, Mohammad, and the Buddha. One difference that can be found among the three is the fact that the Buddha never considered himself a divine figure. What is more, he didn’t even consider himself to be central in his message. For the Buddha, the Dhamma, and not a specific person, should have the centrality of the message. His Dhamma, as presented by the Buddha, would not live by the authority of a certain person, as in Christianity and Islam, but by the authority of its own teachings.¹⁰²

Another difference between the Buddha and other spiritual teachers is the role they play in the process of liberation. The Buddha is not a *Moksha Data*, or giver of salvation, but a *Marga Data*, or “way finder”. Buddhism is not considered a revelation but rather, a discovery, the result of “inquiry and investigation”. The Buddha would not give any kind of salvation, but would simply show the way through his teachings. Ambedkar has special interest in highlighting the more secular and rational aspects of Buddhism and, therefore, he wants to highlight elements such as the lack of a divine leader or the absence of a

¹⁰¹ Tartakov, 2003, pp. 192–213.

¹⁰² *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 117-118. We also referred to this in Chapter 1 and the last words of the Buddha in the *Mahaparinibbanasutta*, in Rahula, pp. 136-139.

process of salvation through divine intervention. For Ambedkar, Buddhism is a set of teachings discovered by a simple man who taught simple people. Buddhism “is based on a universal experience of life” and “it is open to anyone to question it.”¹⁰³ Ambedkar is bringing to his community a spiritual path. But he is also bringing a new approach to this path; an approach in which critical thinking and a spirit of inquiry become central tenets. According to Johannes Beltz, “Ambekdar’s most important innovation was in his viewing Buddhism as totally secularist and anti-traditional. According to him, the Buddha never claimed infallibility for his message, on the contrary, he invited it being tested and questioned. Elements of it could even be omitted if they proved unnecessary or obsolete. The Buddha, therefore, certainly did not intend to invent another normative religious tradition.”¹⁰⁴

In his analysis of the Buddha, Christ, and Mohammad, Ambedkar also addresses the social elements of their teachings. For him, Christ’s and Mohammad’s social messages were more widely accepted and integrated in their religious traditions. However, Buddhism’s social message was not always so clear. This is a key aspect for Ambedkar. For him, it is important to assert that the Buddha’s original teachings contained also a social message. The type of transformation the Buddha brought would go beyond an individual path of liberation, becoming a collective process that involves everyone. It does not only bring liberation from individual suffering, but also from social forms of suffering inflicted by institutionalized forms of oppression.

Ambedkar addresses this in a remarkable passage of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*¹⁰⁵ in which he explicitly asks “Did the Buddha have no Social Message?” Buddhism is usually seen as a rather individualistic path to enlightenment and transformation. Ambekdar, however, claims as part of the Buddhist Dhamma, the teachings of justice, love, liberty, equality, and fraternity, all teachings that are developed in community. For Ambedkar, however, the Buddha’s social message “has been buried.”¹⁰⁶ It has been deli-

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 121.

¹⁰⁴ Beltz, Johannes, “Introduction”, In Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (eds.) *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 1-17. This reference can also be found in Aakash Singh’s edition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

¹⁰⁵ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 122.

¹⁰⁶ This message, Ambedkar tells us, seems to “have been buried by modern authors.” *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 122.

berately manipulated or eliminated by groups with certain interests, like monks, who preferred to emphasize a more individual process of transformation, or by Brahmins, who wanted to perpetuate the inequalities of the caste system. Ambedkar, however, does not provide evidence to support this claim. According to Queen,¹⁰⁷ Ambedkar used Oldenberg's analysis of early Buddhists texts in his reformulation of the Four Noble Truths. However, it is not clear what "modern authors" Ambedkar refers to in regards to the Buddha's social message.

In Navayana Buddhism, the Buddha does address social issues, and brings a social message of transformation and social justice. But what then, according to Ambedkar, is the Buddha's social message?

3.4.2. The Six Elements of a New Dhamma

Six elements form the core of the Navayana Dhamma:¹⁰⁸ Purity, perfection, life in Nibbana, giving up cravings, impermanence, and Karma.

The first element of the Navayana Dhamma is purity. This refers to the idea of maintaining "purity of life." This is accomplished by maintaining a clean and pure body, speech, and mind. The second element is perfection. This refers to the idea of "reaching perfection in life," accomplished by cultivating the bodhisattva's paramitas, such as patience, vigour, or concentration. The third element of Dhamma is to "live in Nibbana," the most central doctrine of the Buddha. Because of the centrality of this teaching and for the innovative approach Ambedkar brings, it is analyzed in detail in section 3.9. of this thesis, The Theory of Nirvana. The fourth element of Dhamma focuses on giving up cravings. Ambedkar's understanding of craving is connected to ideas of health, wealth, and the cause of suffering. This is part of his new approach to the Four Noble Truths and is explained in more detail in section 3.1. The Two Main Questions. The fifth element of Dhamma is impermanence, "the belief that all compound things are impermanent." Impermanence has three aspects: that of "composite things"; that of "individual beings"; and impermanence of "the self-nature of conditioned things." Impermanence teaches the importance of non attachment and it is addressed by Ambedkar from a moral perspective. The sixth and last element of the

¹⁰⁷ Queen, 2004.

¹⁰⁸ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 123-132. These six elements are presented in the chapter "What is Dhamma," where Ambedkar displays his most important ideas. This is also the chapter where some of his most outstanding innovations can be found. This section of the thesis introduces them, but the Navayana approach to Nibbana and Karma are analyzed in more detail in subsequent sections.

Navayana Dhamma is Karma, considered an instrument of moral order. This approach is another of the most innovative aspects introduced by Ambedkar's philosophy, and is treated in more detail in section 3.8. of this thesis, The Theory of Karma.

3.4.3. The Eight Boundaries of a New Dhamma

Navayana Buddhism was founded as a response to the injustices created by the social structures based on Brahmanic Philosophy. Buddhism has not been a major religion in India for centuries. However, as a religion born there, its strong ties with other Indian philosophies is evident in the different doctrines on which Buddhism is based. Brahmanic and Buddhist philosophies share some of these doctrines, while others set them radically apart from each other. If Navayana Buddhism is born, to a great extent, as a response to Brahmanism, setting clear boundaries with it becomes of the utmost importance for Ambedkar. For that reason he wrote *What is Not Dhamma*,¹⁰⁹ to establish the boundaries between Brahmanic Philosophy and his new Buddhist school. With *What is Not Dhamma*, Ambedkar has a double intent: to explain and reject important tenets of Brahmanism and, to deepen certain aspects of his conception of Buddhism, such as rationalism, the Law of Kamma, or the theory of Nama-Rupa. Of especial importance is Ambedkar's elaboration of the Theory of Anatta, or No-Self. His new approach is one of the innovations Navayana Buddhism introduces and it is analyzed in section 3.6. of this thesis, The Theory of Anatta. *What is Not Dhamma*, is divided into eight sections, each one dedicated to a belief explicitly rejected by Ambedkar's Buddha: The supernatural; *Ishwara*, or God; union with Brahma; the soul; sacrifices; speculation; knowledge without virtue; and the infallibility of the Vedas.

For Ambedkar, rationalism is an essential quality of Buddhism and the rejection of the supernatural follows as a consequence of this. The Navayana approach to rationalism is founded in the Doctrine of Causation, the Law of Kamma, which Ambedkar situates as the most central in Buddhism.¹¹⁰ It is important to remember that he previously claimed this centrality¹¹¹ for the doctrine of Nibbana. Based on this, my hypothesis is that Navayana philosophy is founded on two main doctrines: the Doctrine of Nibbana and the Doctrine of Kamma, both of them presented from Ambedkar's innovative approach. The Doctrine

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 133-150.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p.133.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 125.

of Nibbana gives the basis for Navayana's social message. The Doctrine of Kamma gives the basis for Navayana's rationalism and its rejection of Brahmanic Philosophy.

Ambedkar's rejection of the belief in God stems from the Brahmanic understanding of God, but it is not limited to it. It is a rejection of any idea of God that considers it both creator of the universe and supreme moral being. Therefore, Navayana Buddhism rejects the doctrine of the existence of God found in Brahmanism or in any other religious traditions. One of Ambedkar's arguments for the Navayana rejection of the idea of God is his understanding of religion itself. The purpose of religion is not to regulate the relation between man and a divine being, but it is a social instrument for human happiness. For him: "the centre of religion lay not in the relation of man to God. It lay in the relation between man and man. The purpose of religion is to teach man how he should behave towards other men so that all may be happy."¹¹²

This connects with the third belief rejected by Navayana Buddhism, union with Brahma. This belief is based on the doctrine of Vedantism. According to this doctrine, there is a principle of life called Brahma, and there is the individual soul, called Atman. In Vedantism, both are one and the same thing, however, most men are not aware of this. Man's liberation would take place by achieving this realization, the realization of the union between Brahma and Atman. The Navayana rejection of this doctrine is greatly influenced by Sankhya Philosophy, illustrated by Ambedkar in his account of the encounter between the Buddha and the philosopher Kapila.¹¹³ According to Kapila, truth must always be supported by proof, and valid proof only comes from perception or inference. If this criterion is applied to the doctrine of the union between Brahma and Atman, no perception or inference can be found to support it as valid proof and it, therefore, must be rejected.¹¹⁴

The fourth belief rejected by Navayana Buddhism is the Doctrine of the Soul. Due to its importance in Ambedkar's revision, it is analyzed in more detail in section 3.6. of this thesis.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid., p. 135.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 53.

¹¹⁴ We talked in more detail about Sankhya Philosophy and the position of other Indian schools in regards to their theory of knowledge and the "pramanas" in section 3.2. of this thesis, "The Cause of Suffering."

¹¹⁵ 3.6. The Theory of Anatta.

Sacrifices and speculation are the fifth and sixth beliefs rejected by the Navayana Dhamma. Also opposed to Brahmanism is the rejection of the belief in “reading books on Dhamma”. This refers to a superficial approach to spiritual pursuits and learning. For Ambedkar, Brahmins pursue knowledge as an end in itself. As an elite, they dedicate their lives to the accumulation of knowledge, disregarding the cultivation of virtue as part of the learning process. Cultivating virtue, on the contrary, leads to a better and more democratic use of knowledge, absent in a Brahmanic perspective. Navayana Buddhism defends that education is for all, and that knowledge needs always to be accompanied by Sila, or virtue. Navayana Buddhism also rejects the “infallibility of the books of Dhamma.”¹¹⁶ Through this, Ambedkar’s Buddha declares his opposition to the authority of the Vedas and their sacredness. For him “everything must be subject to examination.”¹¹⁷

3.4.4. The Philosophy of a New Dhamma

What are the powers and qualities that need to be cultivated to realize the Navayana Dhamma? Does the new Dhamma have a social message? Ambedkar’s philosophy focuses on the qualities or Paramitas that are most essential for the realization of his message. Another key element included in his philosophy is the social aspect of the Dhamma, which takes a central dimension in Navayana Buddhism. The four most important elements of Saddhamma, or the Philosophy of Dhamma, as stated by Ambedkar, are: Its purpose; Pradnya; Maitri; and the Dhamma’s social philosophy.

1. The Purpose of Navayana Buddhism

“What is the purpose of religion?” This is the first and most fundamental question in order to understand the core of Ambedkar’s message: What the purpose of religion is and what the purpose of Buddhism, in particular, should be. After decades of studying the main world religions, Ambedkar reaches his own conclusion: Buddhism was the religion that could best address what for him were the essential questions of humanity. However, Ambedkar’s intent was not to adopt a new religion. It was to put an end to the discrimination and violence suffered by Untouchables. Addressing this specific situation would require, therefore, a new approach to Buddhism. Buddhism was born in India but had, for a long time, been a

¹¹⁶ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 148.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

minority religion in its country of birth. Ambedkar's new understanding of Buddhism would help to open a path for the spiritual and social liberation of the Untouchables. However, he wanted it to have the potential to become a universal path. From religion, to Buddhism, to Navayana Buddhism, this path would open the doors for liberation of both the individual and the collective.

What is the purpose of religion? What is the purpose of Buddhism? What is the purpose of this new approach, of Navayana Buddhism? The purpose of religion, for Ambedkar, is to create what he calls "the kingdom of righteousness on earth."¹¹⁸ But how would this be accomplished? This question needs to be addressed from two dimensions, one affirmative and one negative. The affirmative dimension requires a positive action; it requires taking a specific type of action. For Ambedkar, the basis of his religion lies in three elements. The kingdom of righteousness on earth is accomplished by learning and practicing these three elements. They are Pancha Sila, or the Five Precepts; the Path of Righteousness, or Ashtanga Marga,¹¹⁹ and the Ten Paramitas. The second dimension requires a negative action, it requires the removal or elimination of something. In order to accomplish the kingdom of righteousness on earth two elements need to be removed: inequity and misery. How can these two elements be removed? I explain this through a four-step process, starting from the goal or end, righteousness on earth, to its beginning or first step. This four-step process would develop as follows:

1. To accomplish righteousness on earth, inequity and misery need to be removed.
2. To remove inequity and misery, permanent goodness needs to be created.
3. To create permanent goodness, a good disposition needs to be created.
4. To create a good disposition, we need to train the mind.

So the very first step needed for human liberation, both at an individual and collective level, is the training of the mind.¹²⁰ Let us remember that the training of the mind is the chief element of Samma Ditti, or Right View, first and most important element in the Path of Righteousness, equivalent to the Eightfold

¹¹⁸ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 152.

Chapter 2 provides further detail on this idea and Ambedkar's influences for his elaboration.

¹¹⁹ The Eightfold Path.

¹²⁰ Ambedkar, through the Buddha's words, says that the training of the mind is "the same as the training of a man's disposition." He based these teachings on the *Devadaha Sutta*, contained in the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

Path. Ambedkar adds another element to the training of the mind: in order to accomplish righteousness, this first step needs to be accompanied by having the strength to always stand for what is right.¹²¹

All these elements set the foundation of the Buddha's Dhamma, and, for Ambedkar, they provide tools to step onto the path of liberation towards the kingdom of righteousness on earth. With this foundation, necessary to take action, he establishes the three essential elements in the philosophy of the Navayana Dhamma. Pradnya and Maitri are the two Paramitas at its foundation. The third one is the social dimension of the Buddha's message.

2. Pradnya

Pradnya, or wisdom, is presented in opposition to the idea of knowledge in Brahmanic Philosophy. In Brahmanism, learning is restricted. It is accessible only to men who pertain to the three superior classes of Chaturvarna. They are the only ones who have the right to access to any type of formal learning. On the contrary, Shudras and women are not only banned from learning, but banned from even acquiring literacy. The Buddha opposes this doctrine and defends a belief that all should have access to knowledge,¹²² regardless of caste or gender.

3. Maitri

Maitri is the second paramita of chief importance in the Buddha's Navayana Dhamma. Ambedkar is aware of the differences among Buddhist schools, mostly between Theravada and Mahayana. Each of them stresses certain qualities rather than others as foundation of the Buddha's teachings. For Ambedkar, the main differences between these two schools lies in situating whether Pradnya, wisdom, or Karuna, compassion, is the primary foundation of their teachings. Navayana Buddhism, however, is formulated as embracing both, Pradnya and Karuna, at the same level. At the same time, the quality of Maitri is considered a step beyond Karuna, or compassion. Karuna is understood as love for all human beings, whereas Maitri is love or compassion for all sentient beings. Maitri includes Karuna, and makes it part of it. Maitri, therefore, is the second foundational paramita, along with Pradnya, in the Navayana philosophy of Dhamma.

¹²¹ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 151.

¹²² Based on the *Lohicca Sutta*, in the *Digha Nikaya*.

4. The Buddha's Social Message¹²³

The Navayana philosophy of Dhamma creates a new way to deliver the Buddha's message. For that, it requires a third pillar, an element that, along with Pradnya and Maitri, completes the tools necessary for the Navayana path of liberation. This element is the Buddha's social message. This message, according to Ambedkar, is summarized in the idea that the Navayana Dhamma has the power to pull down all social barriers. But how does it do so? The teachings of the Navayana Buddha have the capacity to eliminate social barriers in three different ways: by rejecting the idea of separation among fellow humans; by rejecting the idea that birth determines a person's worth; and by promoting social equality.

The promotion of equality in the Navayana Dhamma would oppose the Brahmanic structure of Chaturvarna. For Ambedkar, there is a parallelism between Chaturvarna and Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism was a theory elaborated in the late nineteenth and early 20th century based on Charles Darwin's theory of the evolution of the species. According to Social Darwinism, natural selection, as applied to plants and animals in the natural world, applied also to individuals and peoples. This theory was used to promote imperialism, as well as to justify social policies that discriminate against the most vulnerable of society. Ambedkar himself seems to accept certain premises of Social Darwinism but, only in a kind of strategic way, so that he can give an opposite approach to their discriminative dimension. He uses concepts such as "struggle for existence" and "the survival of the fittest." However, his idea of "struggle" seems to be more closely related to the Marxist concept of "class struggle" than to the competitive and hierarchical approach that permeates Social Darwinism. For Ambedkar the terms "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest" may have seemed so compatible to what the structure of Chaturvarna proposes, that he applies them into his arguments in order to firmly reject Chaturvarna, and defend an equal society. At the same time, if that is the case, they inspired his idea of "struggle" in the Marxist concept of "class struggle," he uses it to effectively turn a hierarchical and unequal struggle into one for the uplifting of the most vulnerable of society. For Ambedkar, it is a fact that people are born different. People are born with different qualities, such as intelligence, or strength, and in different amounts. Society, however, as it

¹²³ In this section Ambedkar uses references of the *Majjhima Nikaya* and the *Khuddaka Nikaya*. From the *Majjhima Nikaya*, he uses the *Esukari Sutta* and the *Assalayana Sutta*. From the *Khuddaka Nikaya*, he uses the *Sutta Nipata*. This information comes from Aakash Singh's notes in his edition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 162 and 163.

exists, is characterized by “the struggle for existence.” For Ambedkar, the struggle for existence is based on a rule of inequality, which makes the fittest the ones who survive. However, an ideal society would not only promote the fittest, but the best in every aspect. An ideal society would promote and develop the best in every person; it would be guided by what he calls “the rule of life,” which brings justice and equality. For Ambedkar, the ideal society is based on a religion that brings perfect justice, tolerates no oppression, and promotes happiness for all its members.

As we have just mentioned, Ambedkar accepts the Marxist idea that history has evolved so far through class struggle. The inequalities that characterize society as it has existed, make the conflict between classes inevitable. Social classes have been in conflict as a result of their fight for survival, in a collective rather than an individual way. Ambedkar would use both, the idea of class struggle and struggle for existence as a way to describe what has been part of human history so far. The kind of society he defends, however, and the means to accomplish it are radically different from that of Marxism or Social Darwinism. Ambedkar’s ideals and means to accomplish them are comprised in his philosophy of Navayana Buddhism.¹²⁴

Ambedkar’s ultimate intention is, therefore, to bring a social message that is in complete contraposition to Brahmanic Philosophy and its understanding of the ideal society. The system of Chaturvarna, previously analyzed before, portrays the ideal society according to Brahmanism. Chaturvarna is regulated by the principle of graded inequality and is at the heart of Brahmanic social philosophy. However, in the Navayana Dhamma, the Buddha would clearly oppose, not only the caste system, but the whole doctrine of Chaturvarna as well as the main elements of Brahmanic social philosophy. According to some scholars,¹²⁵ early Buddhism accepted the caste system, and Ambedkar may have been aware of this. He certainly was aware of the criticism to Buddhism in regards to a lack of social message. However, in order to serve his purpose of creating a new social and religious movement, he seems to ignore these facts

¹²⁴ Section 2.2.4. of this thesis, “Karl Marx” provides further detail about this issue. Ambedkar points at his agreement with Marx on a value such as equality, and the improvement of the material conditions of the lower classes. However, the transformation he wants to bring with Navayana Buddhism goes beyond this. Navayana brings elements of Buddhism, but it also, and fundamentally for Ambedkar, embraces the values of the European tradition of the Enlightenment, as it is pointed out in his work *The Buddha or Karl Marx* and explained in section 2.2.4.

¹²⁵ Krishan, 1986, Ellis, 2019.

and focuses instead on what would help him to achieve his goal. He wanted to find a way to incorporate a message of social justice in a tradition that did not seem to have focused on it as part of its teachings. Ambedkar wanted to bring to Buddhism a potential for social justice that seemed to have generally been not central or completely ignored in Buddhist history. And he wanted to bring this message from the words of the Buddha himself. This would be the way to make his Navayana Buddhism the most powerful tool in the hands of the most vulnerable. For this purpose he created a methodology to read and interpret Buddhist texts. This methodology would help to identify the Buddha's "original message." In this way, Navayana Buddhism would "restore" Buddhism's potential for equality and liberation. With this methodology, anyone who reads a Buddhist text would be able to apply its three principles and identify the Buddha's "true message," a message that, for many, was not even there in the first place. However, with the purpose of proving this, Ambedkar created three hermeneutic principles, which are analyzed next. For Ambedkar, there is no doubt, the Buddha was "the strongest opponent of caste, and the earliest and staunchest upholder of equality."¹²⁶

3.5. Ambedkar's Hermeneutic Principles

We have learned that the study of the ancient philosophies of India gave the Buddha a solid foundation to answer the main questions of human existence: the causes of suffering and unhappiness, and the means to eliminate them. We also learned that Navayana philosophy is elaborated as a response to Brahmanic Philosophy, whose principles determined the social conditions of India for thousands of years. Of its four main theses, the Brahmanic Doctrine of Karma is strongly criticized by Ambedkar's Buddha, and this criticism sets the foundation for his own new theory of Karma. The Brahmanic doctrine of Karma is founded on the thesis of the transmigration of the soul. According to this thesis a human being is compounded of a body and a soul and, after death, the soul transmigrates from the person who dies to a new-born. This doctrine is based on the idea of the existence of a soul, which is contrary to the Buddhist idea of Anatta, or no-soul. For Ambedkar, it is essential to understand the difference between the two, because in this difference lies the key for the root of human suffering, and for the perpetuation of the social inequality created by Brahmanism.

¹²⁶ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 161.

For Ambedkar, the Brahmanic Law of Karma had a clear purpose, to enable “the state or the society to escape responsibility for the condition of the poor and the lowly.” The Law of Karma, as understood in Brahmanism, perpetuates inequality and, therefore, human suffering and unhappiness. This allows Brahmins and upper classes to indefinitely enjoy the benefits of better social conditions, only possible at the expense of keeping the lower classes subjected in their position. We also learned that the three main qualities to cultivate on the Buddhist path are Pradnya, Karuna, and Maitri, an all-embracing compassion for all sentient beings. Considering this, Ambedkar asks if a law of karma that, far from cultivating these qualities, perpetuates human suffering, is conceivable at all as part of the Buddha’s Dhamma. Some believe that the Brahmanic and the Buddhist law of karma are similar but, according to Ambedkar, this is because of conscious attempts to create a misunderstanding. As we learned, he claims that some, with questionable intentions, attempted to introduce the Brahmanic doctrine of Karma into the Buddha’s teachings.¹²⁷ This claim is, however, questionable.

Scholars such as Queen,¹²⁸ see Ambedkar’s claim of inauthenticity of some the Buddha’s teachings as reasonable and justifiable. And he points at the possibility of misreports in some suttas, in part, due to the less reliable accuracy of the oral tradition. For Queen:

“The burden of the argument is that because of oral transmission and the vast scope of the Buddha’s teachings, inadvertent misreporting of the *Buddha-vacana* or authentic Buddha-sayings took place, as acknowledged in five suttas. Thus it becomes necessary today to apply certain tests of authenticity to the scriptures... These three criteria - rationality, social benefit, and certainty - are applied to the traditional and supplementary material that Ambedkar reworks. And they may be seen as the proximate answer to critical questions of inclusion and arrangement.”¹²⁹

However, some recent studies provide extensive evidence that early Buddhist texts with teachings attributed to the Buddha have passed down with extreme accuracy, regardless of the lineage they belong

¹²⁷ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 185.

¹²⁸ Queen, C., Sallie, K., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movement in Asia*, Albany, SUNY, 1996.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 59.

to. This evidence also suggests that they belong to the same Buddha's lifetime or close to it. According to a study done by Sujato and Brahmali:

“Our argument covers two main areas: (...) 2. The evidence that the early Buddhist texts stem from close to the Buddha's lifetime, and that they were generally spoken by the historical Buddha.

Most academic scholars of Early Buddhism cautiously affirm that it is possible that the early Buddhist texts contain some authentic sayings of the Buddha. We contend that this drastically understates the evidence. A sympathetic assessment of relevant evidence shows that it is very likely that the bulk of the sayings in the early Buddhist texts that are attributed to the Buddha were actually spoken by him. It is very unlikely that most of these sayings are inauthentic.”¹³⁰

Sujato and Brahmali also refer to the fact that this consistency in the accuracy has been found through many studies conducted in the last century. Strong evidence seems to have existed since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

“The early Buddhist texts are varying recensions of the same body of texts because they stem from a period before Buddhism split into different schools (...) They have been preserved in essentially the same form since then. We possess early Buddhist texts from a substantial variety of ancient Indian Buddhist schools, including the Mahavihara (modern-day Theravada) of Sri Lanka, the Dharmaguptaka, Mahasanghika, Mahisasaka, Mulasarvastivada, Sarvastivada, and others of uncertain affiliation. (...) A century of detailed study has consistently shown that they are essentially identical in doctrine irrespective of transmission lineage.”¹³¹

There seems to be evidence, however, that there are interpolations in the Anguttara Nikaya, which was completed later than the other Nikayas.¹³² Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Anguttara Nikaya seems to have been used by Ambedkar to a minor extent. Ambedkar based his accusations of manipulations by brahmins in mainly two topics: the doctrine of Karma and the Buddha's social message. For

¹³⁰ Sujato, B., Brahmali, B. *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*, Chroniker Press, Toronto, 2015, p. 10.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 45.

¹³² “Caution needs to be exercised, however, regarding the Ekottara Agama, which is nominally the collection corresponding to the Pali Anguttara Nikaya (...) Scholars agree that it includes proto-Mahayanist additions (...), thereby establishing its late date of completion compared to the rest of the early Buddhist texts.” Ibid, p. 47.

the doctrine of karma, Aakash Singh refers mostly to Ambekdar's use of the Majjhima Nikaya and the Samyutta Nikaya.¹³³ When dealing with the Buddha's social message, Ambedkar usually addresses the issue with references to contemporary Western sources, such as Karl Marx, or Social Darwinism, as we have seen. This use of contemporary Western sources to support early Buddhist ideas might seem quite odd. However, Ambedkar's concern was to bring a new interpretation of the Buddha. And through these sources he would provide arguments to support his vision for Navayana Buddhism, a vision based on the idea that the Buddha was strongly opposed to injustice and inequality. This was his own understanding of the Buddha's Dhamma, and this is what he wanted Navayana Buddhism to be based on. His ultimate purpose, in the end, is to make sure that a message of social justice based on rationalism and certainty is considered as part of the Buddha's original legacy, and that is why he created his interpretative principles. However, these principles should not be seen as scholarly tools, but as a complete new lens from which to read and apply the Buddha's Dhamma.

Ambedkar, therefore, created three principles that would help to tell the difference between what he was presenting as "true teachings" of the Buddha and those supposedly introduced by Brahmins or anyone who wanted to manipulate this true message. In order to do this, Ambedkar, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*,¹³⁴ presents a type of verification test, comprised of three principles. These principles, applied to any of the Buddha's teachings, would help any reader to distinguish the Buddha's actual message from those introduced by other sources. Queen calls these Ambedkar's Hermeneutic Principles.¹³⁵ Any of the teachings found in Buddhist canonical texts, in order to be considered as authentically coming from the Buddha, should meet these three criteria: certainty, social benefit, and rationality.

As we have explained above, these principles should be understood, not so much as a hermeneutic tools, but as part of Ambedkar's objective of introducing a dimension of social justice into a tradition that generally ignored it. We have learned in Chapter 2 that clear examples of social justice in Buddhist movements, in general terms, do not start to appear until the nineteenth century. Even though from a scho-

¹³³ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 178-182.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 184-185.

¹³⁵ Queen, Christopher S. "Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation", in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (eds.) *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Albany: SUNY, pp. 45-72.

larly perspective, Ambedkar's approach to Buddhist texts is highly questionable, from a political perspective, it is clear that he is providing an instrument for the social movement that Navayana Buddhism is creating. The three criteria he brings to "distinguish" the Buddha's message would give the Dalit movement two pillars: the one that Buddhism provides and the one that social justice provides. What are these three criteria?

The criteria of certainty refers to the fact that the Buddha always stated his views in a definite and conclusive way and, according to Ambedkar, when he was not certain, the Buddha always made sure it was clear he was presenting only tentative views. The criteria of social benefit is based on the idea that the Buddha's main concern was human welfare. Any idea that could be a detriment to the wellbeing of all, could not have been taught by the Buddha and, therefore, should be excluded from the Buddha's original message. The last criteria, rationality, comes from the idea that the Buddha's teachings were always based on reason and logic. Ambedkar elaborated this criteria after his readings of Lakshmi Narasu's *The Essence of Buddhism*,¹³⁶ who defended that rationalism should be the guide in all interpretations of the Buddha's teachings.

Ambedkar provides these three principles for the Navayana reader to distinguish between the Brahmanic and the Buddhist Law of Karma, the Doctrine of the Soul and the Doctrine of Anatta, or any other teaching that would have been attributed to the Buddha, but did not meet the message of social justice and rationality he wanted to incorporate in Navayana Buddhism. It is important to remember that Ambedkar has a main political objective: to bring justice to the Dalits, and to create an Indian society based on equality and dignity for all. His readings of Buddhist texts, including his elaboration of these principles, is always guided by this ultimate purpose.

3.6. The Theory of Anatta

Ambedkar rejects the doctrine of the soul and he explicitly does so in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.¹³⁷ The Navayana Dhamma rejects the belief in the soul based on the theory of Atman. According to Ambedkar's interpretation of this theory, we are born with a soul, atman, which lives inside the

¹³⁶ Narasu, P.L. *The Essence of Buddhism*, Mumbai, 1948. Thacker & Co.

¹³⁷ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 138-141.

body but it is distinct from it.¹³⁸ As pointed out before, Ambekdar's theory of Anatta is based on an interpretation that limits the Buddhist concept of anatta to no-soul, however, *anatta* or *anatman*, in Buddhism, goes beyond this. As we learned in the first chapter, the Buddhist theory of anatta involves the denial of a unified or continuous self, not only in an afterlife, but in this life as well. Considering our analysis of Ambedkar's philosophy, my hypothesis is that he ignores this Buddhist understanding of the theory of Anatta because it might not serve to consolidate and uplift the identity of Dalits and lower castes. The Buddhist denial of self rejects the idea of any type of identification. Not only a collective identification, but also the identity of the individual self. Ambedkar's objective is ultimately to create an equal society where there are no castes. And for him, a necessary step for this to happen is, first, the recognition of the oppression suffered by specific groups and individuals within the Indian society. This recognition would have to necessarily rely on the acceptance of a specific identity, both a collective self and an individual self. Buddhism fundamentally rejects both, However, Ambedkar ignores this aspect and elaborates a theory in which the empowerment of an individual self and the affirmation of a collective identity are essential. His main target is the idea of the soul that Brahmanism brings. This theory, for him, brought the oppression of Dalits, women, and lower castes, These groups would need to, first, be recognized in society as citizens with full rights. Only then, when they become members of a society in equal terms with the rest, could their humanity be restored. From this perspective, the Buddhist approach to the theory of anatta as no-self could, not only not serve, but even hinder the liberation of these groups. Ambedkar, therefore, only takes those aspects of the theory of anatta that would support his arguments against Brahmanism, and would serve the purpose of liberation as he understood it.

Ambedkar, then, focuses exclusively on the ideal of Anatta as no-soul, and the lack of a continuous soul that persists throughout lifetimes. As opposed to this, in Brahmanic Philosophy, after the body dies, the soul is born in another body. Ambedkar provides three arguments against this understanding of Atman. To elaborate these arguments, Ambekdar uses a variety of sources, both traditional and contempo-

¹³⁸ It is important to notice that there are multiple interpretations of this theory, and the term *atman* is not necessarily convertible to "soul," even though Ambedkar uses it in this way, as I explain in the coming lines.

rary, such as the Mahali Sutta,¹³⁹ the Sabhasava Sutta,¹⁴⁰ as well as scientific discoveries and new theories of consciousness of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Ambedkar's first argument is that the belief in the existence of a soul is the origin of all superstitions and it was used to justify the creation of priesthood. In any religion, according to him, priesthood was used to exercise control over their believers' lives, denying their freedom of thought and spirit of inquiry.

The second argument is the Theory of Nama-Rupa, or Sentient Being. According to this theory, all sentient beings are a compound of physical and mental elements called *khandas*.¹⁴¹ A sentient being is formed of body and consciousness. The body is called Rupa Khanda and is formed by the physical elements, earth, water, fire, and air. Consciousness is called Nama Khanda and is the centre of any sentient being. Nama is formed by sensations, perceptions, and states of mind. These mental elements arise from Nama, or consciousness.¹⁴² One may wonder, then, what is the origin of consciousness? Ambedkar, from a materialist perspective,¹⁴³ states that when a sentient being is born, he or she is born with consciousness and, when death comes, consciousness dies as well. Ambedkar makes this distinction because he ultimately wants to reject the possibility of reincarnation. For Ambedkar, there is no continuity between a soul in a past life and in the present life. This continuity is used by Brahmanic Philosophy to justify the discriminative social structure of Chaturvarna. For this reason it should be rejected. His approach to the relation between consciousness and body needs to be understood from this approach, as it is further explained in the next chapter.

Consciousness, therefore, is not reborn in another body or united with Brahma, as Brahmanic Philosophy explains. For Ambedkar, the relation between consciousness and the body is the same as that of an electric field and a magnetic field. A magnetic field in relation to an electric field is called an "induced

¹³⁹ Mahali Sutta, in the *Digha Nikaya*.

¹⁴⁰ Sabhasava Sutta, in the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

¹⁴¹ Further detail about this is given in the description of the Five Aggregates provided in Chapter 1.

¹⁴² When giving this argument, Ambedkar makes explicit reference to modern psychology theories. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 140.

¹⁴³ Pradeep Gokhale, in his article 'Universal Consequentialism,' defends the idea that Ambedkar presents a materialist approach in his theory of Atman and in his Navayana philosophy as a whole.

field.” This means that a magnetic field arises whenever there is an electric field. The process by which this happens is not yet clear, but scientists know that, whenever there is an electric field, a magnetic field arises with it. This is similar to the relation between consciousness and the body, whenever one arises, the other arises as well.¹⁴⁴

The last argument against the existence of the soul is based on the role that consciousness plays in a sentient being. For Ambedkar, a person becomes a sentient being whenever consciousness arises in him or her. This is the key quality of a human being. The arisen consciousness has three main functions: cognitive, emotional, and volitional. The cognitive function is used to appreciate and apprehend. The emotional function is used to produce feelings. The volitional function is used to give rise to the will and to perform activities.¹⁴⁵ If these are the functions of the human consciousness, what is the place of the soul? What functions does it play in a human being? For Ambedkar, there is no role left for the soul in a sentient being. The soul has no purpose. Therefore, in an advanced understanding of consciousness, there is no room for the idea of soul.

3.7. The Theory of Rebirth¹⁴⁶

In his journey towards a new Theory of Karma, Ambedkar proceeded to dismantle the idea of the soul in his reading of the Brahmanic doctrine of Karma. The Buddha, on the other hand, founds his teachings in the Theory of Anatta, or No-Soul. The idea of rebirth has always been part of the Buddhist tradition and Ambedkar also accepts it as part of the Navayana Dhamma. Is it possible, however, to believe in rebirth without believing in the existence of a soul? The process of rebirth actually takes place, but in this process, there is no need for an entity called “soul”. How is this possible? How does this take place? In order to answer these questions, Ambedkar describes two components in the process of rebirth: The elements or materials that participate in the rebirth, and the person or being that is reborn.

¹⁴⁴ *Buddha and His Dhamma*. p. 141.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 174-182.

According to Aakash Sings’s critical edition, Ambedkar sources for his theory of rebirth are the *Majjhima Nikaya* and the *Samyutta Nikaya*. From the *Majjhima Nikaya*, the suttas referred are the *Culla Dukka Khandha Sutta*, the *Devadaha Sutta*, and the *Alagaddupamma Sutta*. From the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the sutta referred is the *Induka Sutta*.

The materials that participate in the rebirth are the four basic elements of existence: earth, fire, water, and air. They are also the basic compounds of the human body. When the body dies, these basic compounds join the *Akash*, or space, which is formed by a mass of these similar elements. When a new birth takes place, the four elements join together again. However, the elements that form the new being are not necessarily from the same body that was previously alive, they form a new combination. For Ambedkar, the elements of existence can never be destroyed, but they organize and reorganize in different ways, forming the different beings that comprise this world. This is how Navayana philosophy understands the process of rebirth.

An important question, however, may arise: What happens to the body when it dies? For Ambedkar, the body dies because it ceases to produce energy. The energy that was once part of that body then joins the mass of energy of the universe. When death happens, therefore, there is a double process: On the one hand, the basic compounds of the body join the Akash. On the other hand, its energy joins the mass of energy of the universe. In the inverse process, the elements of existence in the Akash realign and generate new matter. When this new matter reunites with energy from the universe, the process of rebirth takes place. And as we can see, there is no soul involved in this process.

The second component of rebirth refers to the person or being reborn. Is it possible that the same person who dies is the same person who is reborn? As explained before, for Ambedkar, a newborn is formed by a combination of the four elements of existence that join with the energy from the Universe. If that combination results in the same being, then the rebirth of the same person takes place. If the combination is different, the new sentient being reborn would be different. From a mathematical standpoint, the probability of the new combination resulting in the same person seems small. Ambedkar does not give further detail about it in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. However, it is important to point out that Ambedkar ultimately wants to reject the possibility of rebirth of a same person. Some Buddhists believe in the idea of reincarnation. However, as we will see later in the analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh's ideas,¹⁴⁷ the Buddha affirmed that reality is, at its core, pure impermanence, and rejected the existence of a self. Therefore, any idea that recognizes the existence of a continuous permanent self, from a Buddhist perspective,

¹⁴⁷ Section 4.3. Ambedkar and Thich Nhat Hanh.

should be rejected. On the other hand, the Brahmanic theory of reincarnation is based on the concept of soul which, according to it, lives on life after life with particular imprints. These imprints determine the social status of the person the soul is reborn in, and this is what Ambedkar ultimately wants to radically reject.

3.8. The Theory of Karma

1. Hinduism Versus Buddhism

The Theory of Karma, along with the Theory of Nibbana, are the central doctrines of Navayana Buddhism. Both of them open the path for the removal of suffering, and for a new type of liberation that includes all. In the formulation of his new philosophy,¹⁴⁸ however, Ambedkar is concerned about similarities that some find between the Law of Karma both in Hinduism¹⁴⁹ and Buddhism. For Ambedkar, in the Hindu law of karma lies the foundation for human suffering and oppression, whereas karma in Buddhism, opens the path for a society based on justice and equality. The Law of Karma, according to this reading of Hinduism, sets the basis for graded inequality and for the oppression of the lower classes, whereas the Law of Karma in Buddhism clears the path for their liberation. Then, how is this misunderstanding possible?

According to Ambedkar, how is the Law of Karma different in Hinduism and Buddhism? The following chart presents a summary of the principles and characteristics provided by him to differentiate them:¹⁵⁰

The Hindu Law of Karma Doctrine of Past Karma or Extended Law of Karma	The Buddhist Law of Karma
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¹⁴⁸ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 184.

¹⁴⁹ It is important to notice that Ambedkar is giving his particular reading of what is called “Hinduism” and Hindu philosophy and this reading is, of course, debatable. There is a variety of views that fall under this label, particularly within philosophical Hinduism.

¹⁵⁰ The following information is based on Chapter Four of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, “Religion and Dhamma”. In it, there is a section entirely dedicated to Karma, pp. 178-182. The section “Transmigration” and “Causes of this Misunderstanding”, pp. 184-185, have also been used to elaborate this chart.

1. Past lives have an effect on the present life.	1. Karma only has an effect on the present life.
2. It is the base of social order: Graded Inequality in <i>Chaturvarna</i> .	2. It is the base of moral order: <i>Maha Karuna</i> or Universal Compassion.
3. It is based on the Doctrine of the Soul.	3. It is based on the Doctrine of Anatta, No-Soul.
4. Theory of Transmigration: After death, the soul moves to a different body.	4. Theory of Rebirth: The materials of existence and energy are realigned and reborn into a new sentient being.
5. It does not leave room for human effort. Current life is determined by impressions on the soul based on past lives.	5. Human effort and actions determine current life.
6. Based on the transmission of past Karma.	6. Based on genetics and the scientific Theory of Heredity.

For Ambedkar, the Buddhist doctrine of Karma is usually confused and misunderstood with the Brahmanic doctrine of Karma. Learning their differences would empower individuals to take control and determine their own lives.

The Brahmanic Law of Karma is also called the doctrine of past Karma or the extended law of karma, and it is based on the doctrine of the soul. According to this law, present lives unfold as a consequence of actions performed in past lives. Negative aspects of one's life, like being poor or being born with a congenital defect, are a consequence of past bad actions. This is one of the main differences between the Buddhist and the Brahmanic understanding of Karma.¹⁵¹ In Navayana philosophy,

¹⁵¹ However, it is important to notice that Buddhist ideas of karma and reincarnation have in fact been used in East Asian countries, like Cambodia, to stigmatize disabled people.

Karma provides the basis for the moral order, whereas for Hinduism, Karma provides the basis for the social order of Chaturvarna, based on graded inequality and a strict division in social classes. For Ambedkar, this doctrine does not allow for human effort: a person's current life is the result of his or her past karma, and it is not affected by the actions and decisions made in this lifetime. According to Brahmanic philosophy, a person's karma produces impressions on their soul. These impressions, carried into a future life, determine a person's actual life. For a Navayana Buddhist, however, a person's life is determined by their efforts and actions made during their lifetime, not their past lives.

The fundamental difference between both doctrines lies in the idea of soul. The Hindu Law of Karma is based on the doctrine of the soul, whereas the Buddhist Law of Karma is based on the doctrine of anatta, or no-soul. In Ambedkar's reading of Hinduism, the body and the soul are distinct elements and when the body dies, the soul transmigrates to a new body.¹⁵² For a Navayana Buddhist, however, we have learned, once a person dies, the basic elements of existence join the Akash, or universe. The energy that imbued the person with life is also reabsorbed by the universe. When a new person is born, these elements that once belonged to a person, realign to create a new sentient being. It is important to note that karma and reincarnation have always been crucial components of Buddhism. Ambedkar, with this reinterpretation of the idea of rebirth is bringing a radically different approach to what has commonly been believed by Buddhists. Ambedkar is creating a radically different theory, which can certainly make many question whether this is Buddhism in the way that Buddhists have been understood so far.

The Navayana Buddhist Law of Karma, therefore, is presented by Ambedkar as having strong roots in science as well as a solid foundation in the Buddha's teachings. Ambedkar refers to the dialogue between the Buddha and Yakkha in the Induka Sutta,¹⁵³ where the Buddha presents what would be the equivalent of a genetic theory of his time. Ambedkar also refers to the scientific Theory of Heredity, discovered by the Austrian botanist Gregor Mendel (1822-1884), considered the founder of modern genetics. According to Mendel's Theory of Heredity, a child inherits the characteristics of their parents. However,

¹⁵² It is important to acknowledge the very different ideas in this regard within what are retrospectively called "Hindu" schools. Both dualism and monism can be found, being the latter widespread within Hinduism at the level of popular lived religion.

¹⁵³ *Samyutta Nikaya*. Ambedkar also uses as evidence of a traditional source the dialogue between the Buddha and Jains in the *Cula Dukkha Khandha Sutta*, in the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

for Ambedkar, according to the Hindu doctrine of Karma, a child does not inherit anything from their parents: whatever inheritance he or she brings comes from the impressions of the soul that transmigrated into his or her body. Whereas Navayana Buddhism accepts the principles of genetics as part of the evolution of life, the Hindu doctrine seems to accept genetic principles only when it comes to the body. The soul, for Hinduism, would not be affected by genetics, since it seems to be “implanted into the body from outside”, from a source that, according to Ambedkar, this doctrine is not able to specify.¹⁵⁴

2. Karma as The Foundation of Social Oppression

In the Buddha’s quest to find the cause of unhappiness and suffering, his first step was to embark on the study of the ancient philosophies of India and learn how they dealt with the essential problems of human existence. In his research, Ambedkar’s Buddha found that Brahmanism set the foundation for an unjust and immutable societal structure. Its transformation, therefore, opens the possibility to remove human suffering.

In order to change this societal structure, it is first necessary to understand the principles it was based on, so that they can be reverted and replaced with others that allow the flourishing of humanity. According to Ambedkar, the four principles of Brahmanic Philosophy were: the infallibility of the Vedas; the salvation of the soul through sacrifices; the Doctrine of Karma; and Chaturvarna. The four of them intertwine in a way that allowed them to permeate and determine the Indian society for thousands of years. Ambedkar’s Buddha, in his quest to find a solution for human suffering, saw the need to expose the injustice and cruelty that lie at the core of these principles. Of these, the Doctrine of Karma plays a special role in human consciousness because, it not only condemns the lower classes to their situation, but it also removes from them the tools to change it. What did Ambedkar’s Buddha find out in his study of this doctrine? What effect did it actually have in the cause of human suffering?

As described before, the doctrine of Karma in Brahmanic Philosophy is based on the existence of a soul, and the claim is that, when a person dies, his or her soul transmigrates into a new being. The soul carries the imprints of a person’s past life, and the person who receives the soul suffers the consequences, good or bad, brought by the imprints of the soul received. For Ambedkar, this doctrine denies the

¹⁵⁴ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 180.

individual the power to determine their own lives and eliminates any possibility of change, both at an individual and a societal level. In his study, he finds four main points of criticism to the Brahmanic doctrine of Karma.

The first is that Karma, as understood in Brahmanism, makes human suffering the exclusive responsibility of the individual, disregarding any societal or institutional responsibility. Suffering is the consequence exclusively of the past bad karma the soul brings to a person. According to this doctrine, no institution, government, or political structure would be responsible for the unhappiness or injustice a person or a group undergoes, only the persons themselves.

Second, if there is no collective or institutional responsibility in human suffering, any kind of collective action to remove it is useless, therefore revolt as a form of social change is useless as well. The doctrine of Karma in Brahmanism would consider that the social conditions people find themselves in can never be altered because they are the consequence of the karma of past lives carried to the present live. Lower classes and those who find themselves in unjust or oppressed situations, could never alter this; they find themselves there because their past actions made them deserve it. No revolt or social action would be able to change it.

According to Brahmanic Philosophy, a person's social position is, then, determined by their karma. The pattern of Chaturvarna, one of the tenets of this philosophy is, therefore, determined by this interpretation of karma. Navayana philosophy points out the consequences this has, especially for Shudras and women, who suffer the worst conditions in this societal structure:

- Women and Shudras are denied the right to education, as well as other rights only permitted to men of the three higher classes.¹⁵⁵
- Denied the right to knowledge and education, women and Shudras can never gain the intellectual tools to question Chaturvarna, or even learn about its principles. As a consequence, they can never have the power to rebel against it and their situation.

¹⁵⁵ The Buddha permitted women to join his monastic community and fully participate in it. However, as in other religions, the experience of women in Buddhism has varied considerably throughout history. It is generally agreed that in early Buddhism women were considered inferior and that there were doctrines clearly misogynist. However, that does not mean that all ancient Buddhism was misogynist. Gross, p. 43.

- Ignorant of the causes of their suffering and of principles of Brahmanic Philosophy, some Shudras and women become sustainers of these ideas and the social structure they create.

Ambedkar's fourth point of criticism is that Brahmanism denies the Shudras the right to bear arms. In this context, the right to bear arms can be understood as the right of self-defence and rebellion against oppression and injustice. For Ambedkar, this is the "ultimate means of achieving freedom a human being has."¹⁵⁶ From the Navayana perspective, a question may arise: Why were Shudras denied this right, and not the other classes? What were the upper classes afraid of when they denied this right to the Shudras? If Brahmins and upper classes really think the present cannot be changed because it is a consequence of past lives, why wouldn't the Shudras be given the right to rebel if, in the end, their situation cannot change? It seems that, deep inside, there is an understanding of the unfairness of this situation and the potential for Shudras to claim their rights. Having denied the right to education, however, keeps them in ignorance and prolongs the situation without questioning it, therefore without seeing the need to rebel against it.

• **The Law of Karma Creates the Social Order**

Fatalism claims that all events are predetermined and, as a consequence, inevitable. A fatalistic interpretation of karma considers that acts committed in past lives produce the suffering of current lives, and that acts committed in past lives make actions in the present life useless. Ambekdar, therefore, rejects a fatalistic interpretation of Karma. This fatalistic interpretation, we have learned, is replaced by a more scientific approach; an approach based on human freedom, as well as individual and collective responsibility. People, both individually and collectively, are responsible for their actions. Their actions create their reality and their social conditions; and if their actions create them, their actions can also change them.

But a question may arise: Where does human morality come from? Isn't it Karma or God who are the ones that determine morality? Navayana Buddhism rejects this idea and provides, as an essential part of its Dhamma, a rather different one.¹⁵⁷ For Ambedkar, moral responsibility does not lie in a God, but in

¹⁵⁶ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 58.

¹⁵⁷ A key section of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in this regard is titled "To Believe that Karma is the Instrument of Moral Order," p. 131. In this section, the Buddha answers the question of how the moral order is maintain.

men: Men and their actions create the moral order in the world and, if that is so, men and their actions can change it. For Ambedkar's Buddha, the Law of Karma involves men's actions and consequences in the present, not in past lives. And it is the Law of Karma, understood in this way, that causes the moral order. "If the moral order is bad, it is because man does Akusala (Bad) Kamma. If the moral order is good, it is because man does Kusala (Good) Kamma."¹⁵⁸ It is human's morality, through their actions, that causes and sustains the moral order, and not God. The Law of Karma, for Ambedkar, was used in Hinduism to justify the graded inequality of Chaturvarna and the unquestionability of the oppression of Shudras and women by upper castes. The fact that a person has been born a Shudra or a woman has nothing to do with the the Law of Karma. Human actions maintain the violence and inequalities suffered by these groups and, therefore, if these actions are changed, the situation will change as well. The Law of Karma, therefore, makes it possible to break the circle of injustice towards Shudras and women, opening the path to true liberation.

3.9. The Theory of Nirvana

According to Ambedkar, Navayana philosophy is sustained by two theories: a new theory of Karma and a new theory of Nibbana. Although there are differences between the Navayana interpretation of these theories and other Buddhist perspectives, Ambedkar's main objective is not to emphasize this difference. His intention is to make a clear distinction between Karma and Nibbana according to Brahmanic Philosophy and Navayana Buddhism. For Ambedkar, Navayana teachings are not new to Buddhism, but new in regards to the Brahmanic understanding of social structure and humanity.¹⁵⁹

As we learned in Chapter 1,¹⁶⁰ the Buddha described Nirvana as the cessation of greed, hatred, and delusion and, as the ultimate goal, it is part of the Third and the Fourth Noble Truths, as well as the Eightfold Path. Many agree that the Buddha did not give much detail about what Nirvana exactly entailed, and throughout the centuries, different Buddhist schools have elaborated on it. It is commonly agreed that the cessation of the "fires" of greed, hatred, and delusion involves the end of the cycle of birth and rebirth,

¹⁵⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁹ In regards to the Buddha and his new Dhamma, Ambedkar says, "He replaced the doctrine of moksha or salvation of the soul by the doctrine of Nibbana." p. 62.

¹⁶⁰ In 1.1.5. Common Buddhist Teachings, section 5., Nirvana.

although this idea plays a major role in the Theravada tradition. The Mahayana tradition, on the other hand, usually regards Nirvana as a kind of process in which attaining Buddhahood is the ultimate goal. In this process, the Buddhist practitioner is still working towards their own liberation. However, helping others to awaken is as important as the attainment of Nirvana itself.

We also learned in Chapter 1 that, some interpretations of Nirvana describe it as a “pure state of mind.”¹⁶¹ In what follows we describe how, for Ambedkar, the role of the mind is crucial in the Navayana path; it is a necessary first step, which does not finish, but rather initiates the process of liberation. For Ambedkar, however, it is not so important to distinguish the Navayana interpretation of Nibbana from other Buddhist interpretations, but from what, for him is *moksha*, or the salvation of the soul in Brahmanic philosophy. In this way, Ambedkar seems to ignore certain similarities that can be found between the common understandings of Nibbana in Buddhism and moksha in Hinduism. For example, both of them would accept the cycle of death and rebirth and the fact that, once liberation is attained, the cycle ends. This means that both also accept the need to liberate from samsara, from this endless cycle. However, for Ambedkar, as we explain in the next paragraphs, the objective is not to liberate *from* samsara, but to liberate *in* samsara. Nibbana, as we will see, is understood as the path of righteousness. And righteousness can only happen *in* samsara, not out of it. The aspiration to end suffering is shared, but it is not by ending samsara that suffering will be extinguished, but by bringing a radical transformation to it.

He also wants to clearly set apart the Navayana understanding of Nibbana from the idea of salvation found in Christianity and Islam. My hypothesis is that Ambedkar does not enter into a contraposition with Buddhist doctrines on Nirvana because he is not ultimately having a dialogue with Buddhism. Buddhism practically disappeared from the Indian society for thousands of years. However, it is important to note that many elements of Buddhism were absorbed into what we now call Hinduism. Even though in Ambedkar’s time Buddhism was a minority religion in India, it was a strong part of the Indian society for centuries, and its disappearance was a long process in which the exchange of practices and ideas between Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as other religions, shaped both of them.¹⁶² Nevertheless, Ambedkar

¹⁶¹ Note 12 in Chapter 1.

¹⁶² Maheshwari, 2014.

wants to focus on what he sees as the consequences of the Hindu tradition in the Indian society of his time, and portray Buddhism as a marginalized and oppressed part of Indian history, since these would be marks lower classes could identify with. He also wants to emphasize the differences between Navayana Buddhism and other major religions such Islam and Christianity which were also, in Ambedkar's time, shaping the reality of Dalits and lower classes.

Ambedkar, therefore, presents the Buddha to his audience as a new type of spiritual leader, very different from Christ or Mohammad, or any Hindu god. The Navayana Buddha guides the way from suffering and oppression to a state free from greed, hatred, and ignorance, but also free from violence, discrimination, and inequality. For Ambedkar, this is a path of righteousness and happiness. In contraposition to the leaders of Islam and Christianity, Ambedkar says, "all prophets have promised salvation. The Buddha is the one teacher who did not make any such promise. For Ambedkar, there is a sharp distinction between a *moksha data* and a *marga data*, one who gives salvation and one who only shows the way. He was only a *marga data*. Salvation must be sought by each for themselves, by their own effort."¹⁶³ This leads us to the distinction between Nibbana in Navayana Buddhism and Moksha in Brahmanism.

Brahmanism promises *moksha* or salvation. According to Brahmanic Philosophy, we have learned, the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives, and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived. As explained, this theory is based on the existence of the soul, rejected by Ambedkar. He also rejects the idea that a present life is dependent on actions performed in previous lives, and current actions do not have the power to affect present conditions. For him, this eliminates the possibility of any social change, in particular the improvement of the lives of the lower classes and women. This ultimately denies the possibility of removing suffering and unhappiness in the current life. This, for Ambedkar, induces a kind of passivity and immobilization that acts in favour of those in the higher classes of society, requiring those in oppressed situations to conform to their circumstances. Ambedkar's words, "Salvation must be sought by each for himself by his own effort" should be better understood under the lens of the Brahmanic view of karma and its effect in the perpetuation of an unjust social structure.

¹⁶³ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 118.

Nibbana, therefore, is different from salvation, on one hand, and from moksha, on the other hand. But now the question arises: What is Nibbana? What is this new understanding of Nibbana that Ambedkar's Buddha brings? Nibbana, in the Navayana Dhamma, has two dimensions: one of subtraction and one of addition; that is, Nibbana, as removal of something and Nibbana as the attainment of something. But what is this "something"? The first dimension refers to Nibbana as the removal of unhappiness. But what do we really mean when talking about unhappiness? Most people think that unhappiness comes from being in need. However, both people who are in need and also those who live amid plenty experience the feeling of unhappiness. Therefore, necessity does not seem to be the reason of unhappiness. For Ambedkar's Buddha, its root lies in greed, which is the result of uncontrolled passions. But what does he mean by "passions"? What are these? There are three categories of passions: The ones related to greed, or *lobha*; the ones, related to hatred, or *dosa*; and the ones related to ignorance, or *avidya*. Greed and hatred refer to the relation between sentient beings, and ignorance refers to our ideas about the world, about having a true or false understanding of reality. A person who cannot control their passions is in chains. Only when those passions can be channeled and controlled, can a person open his path to nibbana.

This brings us to the second dimension of Nibbana: the attainment of that "something," ultimately, the attainment of happiness. Underlying the Navayana conception of Nibbana there are two main ideas:¹⁶⁴ The first is that the focus needs to be put on a person's happiness: Nibbana means the attainment of this state. This needs to be differentiated from moksha as the attainment of the salvation of the soul, as in Brahmanic Philosophy. The second idea underlying the Navayana conception of Nibbana is that happiness takes places in *samsara*, that is, while the person is alive, and not after death.¹⁶⁵ This means that Nibbana does not happen after death or after reincarnation: the path to Nibbana and its attainment should

¹⁶⁴ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 126.

¹⁶⁵ Ambedkar, on p. 127 of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, emphasizes the distinction between Nibbana and Parinibbana. Parinibbana happens when a person who has attained Nibbana dies. Nibbana, on the contrary, would happen during a person's lifetime.

happen during a person's lifetime.¹⁶⁶ But what does "happiness" ultimately mean? What does "Nibbana" ultimately mean? Ambedkar clearly defines it: Nibbana "means enough control over passions so as to enable one to walk on the path of righteousness,"¹⁶⁷ "Nibbana is another name for righteous life."¹⁶⁸

How do we walk on the path of righteousness? How do we live a righteous life? If the path of happiness is the path of righteousness, and this is ultimately nibbana, how do we walk on this path? According to the Navayana Dhamma, this is a new path, a threefold path: the Path of Purity, the Path of Righteousness, and the Path of Virtue.¹⁶⁹ The Path of Righteousness has two main components: Samma Ditti and Samma Samadhi. Samma Ditti involves the training of the mind in order to free it from superstition and to allow it to think freely. Samma Samadhi involves the training of the mind to prepare it to *think* good actions and ultimately give it the power to *do* good actions. The training of the mind has, therefore, two main dimension. An individual dimension: liberation of the mind to think freely, and a collective: to give it the power to bring goodness to the world. The Navayana Path of Virtue has two pillars: pradjna, or wisdom, and maitri, or fellowship. Maitri includes Karuna, or compassion, and Ambedkar interprets it as fellowship among all humans. Pradnya and Maitri are what bring happiness, and ultimately Nibbana into the world, a type of Nibbana that goes beyond the individual to encompass the whole of humanity.

4. Navayana Buddhism and Other Engaged Forms of Spirituality

4.1. Navayana Buddhism and Liberation Theology

The twentieth century experienced a rise in socially engaged forms of spirituality, of which Navayana Buddhism and Liberation Theology are clear examples. Both are based on philosophies that join spiritual and social transformation, from the Buddhist and the Christian tradition respectively. In fact, several parallels exist. These parallels are worth exploring for their relevance to the question of whether

¹⁶⁶ Ambedkar does not seem to be interested in tackling Nibbana as the end of the cycle of *samsara* or the end of the process of birth and rebirth, as traditional Buddhism would do. As mentioned before, he is not establishing a dialogue with Buddhist traditions, but with what he understood as the Brahmanic theory of *moksha* and its social implications.

¹⁶⁷ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 127.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 128.

¹⁶⁹ These three paths have been explained in detail in section 3.3. of this thesis, but here two aspects of them are highlighted.

their innovations, turning towards social justice, are reforms or ruptures. Navayana, as a social philosophy with Buddhist elements, presented itself as a new school of Buddhism. It has been embraced by many, but also strongly opposed by others. What has been the case with other similar movements such as Liberation Theology, considered by many a return to its origins, while for others a complete rupture with the Catholic tradition? How does it compare with Navayana Buddhism, its ideas, and its place as a contemporary Buddhist movement?

Theology of Liberation was a movement born in a post colonized Latin American continent. Most of their countries became independent from Spain a century before, but they still lived under oppressive dictatorships and governments that denied basic human rights and democracy. They also kept a hierarchical class system that perpetuated deep inequalities in countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, or Brazil. Theology of Liberation was born as a response to this system, as a spiritual and political movement with roots in Christianity and Socialism. Theology of Liberation sought, on one hand, to empower the lower classes in Latin American countries, and on the other hand, to bring a renewal of the Christian message that speaks to the concerns of its time. In this sense, Navayana Buddhism and Theology of Liberation seem to have many points in common, such as the historical context of colonization, a certain relation to Marxism and Socialism, and a new perspective on the traditions in which they inscribed themselves. Ambedkar's changes of Buddhist ideas have been identified as a new religion by some, rather than a new school within Buddhism. Liberation Theology and its followers, suffered ostracism and condemnation by the Vatican, however, that message was always seen as part of the Christian landscape. This section aims to be a reflection on both traditions and their engaged forms, first through comparing their main figures, Jesus and the Buddha; and second, by introducing Liberation Theology, Leonardo Boff as one of its most representative philosophers, its Buddhist influences today, and a comparison of some of its features with Navayana Buddhism.

4.1.1. Jesus and The Buddha

Christianity, as are other religions, is based on the figure of a spiritual leader and their life, in this case, the life of Jesus. Buddhism too is based on the life of the historical figure of Siddharth Gautama. Many similarities and differences can be drawn between them, not only between their lives, but also between the role each plays in the religion they founded. One of these common features is how important the

accounts of their lives are in the overall structure of the tradition. Both the story of the life of Jesus and of the Buddha are essential to the understanding of Christianity and Buddhism, regardless of the fact that both Jesus and the Buddha have been questioned as actual historical figures. This questioning may seem equally critical in both religions, however, there is a key difference between them.

Some scholars¹⁷⁰ claim that the existence, or not, of Jesus as a historical figure has radical repercussions for the understanding of Christianity's overall message, because his birth, life, and resurrection are the core of Christianity itself. This, however, is not the case in Buddhism. The Buddha's life is very important in Buddhism. However, what is at its core is the Buddha's teachings and the sets of practices he learned and spread. What is more, Buddhism itself is understood as following the path of these teachings. Becoming a Buddhist is seen more as a process, the process of embarking on what was once the Buddha's own quest. Buddhists do believe that these teachings were accomplished, for the first time, by a specific person in a specific historical time. However, they understand the Dharma could have been developed by someone else in a different historical moment and that would not change the core of Buddhism. For some, if the Buddha hadn't existed but his teachings had, Buddhism would certainly be different, but its core would not have deviated very much from what it is today. His teachings, the Dharma, is what is important in Buddhism, and the Buddha's life helps to illustrate how to follow this path. It works as an example of the learning, but the centrality moves from that of a historical figure, Jesus Christ in the case of Christianity, to the Dharma, not to the Buddha, in Buddhism.

In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar also points out a very important difference between the Buddha and Jesus. Section 3.4.1 of this thesis, The Role of a New Spiritual Leader, is partly dedicated to Ambedkar's comparison between Jesus, the Buddha, and Mohammad. We have learned that one of Ambedkar's main concerns is to found a school of Buddhism that is secular, rational, and scientific. In this sense, it was important for him to emphasize the fact that the Buddha was not a divine being, but a regular person whose realizations are available and can be accomplished by anyone. When comparing these three figures, Ambedkar points out that the Buddha never claimed any divinity for himself; he never claimed to be the son of a god, or to belong to any kind of divine lineage. The Dhamma has the centrality

¹⁷⁰ Williams, Tribe, and Wynne, pages 1-40.

of the Buddhist message. The Dhamma was created so that it would not live by the authority of a certain person, but by the authority of that person's teachings.

In Navayana Buddhism, Ambedkar emphasizes, liberation is not given by divine intervention, but can only be accomplished through the transformation of the individual and of society. When comparing the role that Jesus and the Buddha have in the process of liberation, Ambedkar stresses the fact that the Buddha never called himself a *Moksha Data*, or a "giver of salvation", but a *Marga Data*, or a "way finder". Buddhism, for him, cannot be considered a revelation, but a discovery. The Buddha would not give any kind of salvation, but would show the way to liberation through his teachings. As we have just seen, a crucial feature of Buddhism, for Ambedkar, is that no divinity can be claimed for its founder. Buddhism, as Ambedkar points out, "is open to anyone to question"¹⁷¹ and, as opposed to Christianity, its teachings are "based on a universal experience of life", not on the life of a divinity, as it would be the case with Jesus.

In order to end human suffering, giving up cravings and attachments is central in any understanding of Buddhism, and in Navayana philosophy as well. When Ambedkar refers to this in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*,¹⁷² he seems to have two objectives. First, he aims to explain that this teaching involves a spirit of contentment. Second, he wants to clarify that the Buddha would not be defending meekness or surrender to the circumstances. A spirit of contentment would rather mean not to allow feelings of greed to overpower the person. The Buddha's words are not "Blessed are they who are poor,"¹⁷³ Ambedkar emphasizes. Stressing these words, Ambedkar is clearly referring to Jesus's Beatitudes when, talking to the crowds, he delivers his famous Sermon on The Mount:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,

¹⁷¹ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 121.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, p.128.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*.

for they will inherit the earth.”¹⁷⁴

For Ambedkar, there seems to be an idealization of the poor and the meek in the Christian tradition. It may be questionable if Jesus, when referring to the “poor in spirit,” refers to poor in a material sense, as if idealizing and agreeing with people living in conditions of poverty. What seems to be clear in Ambedkar’s interpretation of the Buddha’s Dhamma is that he did not teach acceptance of living in poor material conditions. For him, the Buddha’s path teaches about greed, hatred, ignorance, attachment, and how to bring them to an end, both at an individual and at a collective level.

4.1.2. Liberation Theology

Navayana Buddhism and Liberation Theology are two socially engaged forms of spirituality that were born during the same decade and in very similar contexts. This section describes what Liberation Theology is, its origins and evolution, and the similarities and intersections that can be found with Navayana Buddhism. The birth of these two movements can be seen as part of a wave of global transformation the world has experienced in the last decades, in which spirituality, a new scientific paradigm, an increasing concern for the environment, and the demand for higher levels of democracy and equality go hand in hand.

Liberation Theology originated in the 1950s as a political and religious movement that interpreted the Gospels as primordially containing a social message of equality and social justice for the marginalized, oppressed, and lower classes of society. In 1955, the social orientation of the Latin American Episcopal Conference, in Brazil, had a major influence on the later Second Vatican Council, which took place during 1962 and 1965 and adopted a more socially oriented message. Liberation Theology was born in this context, a context also of the Cold War, in which the dichotomy between capitalism and communism was at play, both internationally and in most countries’ internal affairs. As a result of this, Liberation Theology based its teachings on a combination of Socialist and Marxist philosophy and a social interpretation of the Gospels. “The preferential option for the poor” was an expression coined by members of this movement to refer to the idea that the needs of the most vulnerable of society, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized should be prioritized if “the kingdom of heaven on Earth” was to be realized.

¹⁷⁴ Matthew 5, 1-12 New International Version.

Liberation Theology was born in Brazil, with Leonardo Boff as its most outstanding figure, and it became one of the most important political, social, and religious movements in Latin America in the seventies and eighties. In the following decades, Liberation Theology embraced and incorporated a broader perspective on who should be considered the most vulnerable or oppressed of society. The Marxist approach of the previous decades directed the view of the movement towards the working class and peasants as the catalyst for social change. However, after the 1980s, environmental concerns and the rights of women were incorporated into the analysis. According to this new approach, the mechanisms of oppression of the current economic and political paradigm not only apply to the poor and the working class, but they actually affect all sentient beings, and every element of the Earth susceptible to this logic of domination.

Liberation Theology and Navayana Buddhism were both born in the same historical context and with a similar message of liberation for the lower classes of society. It is important to note that the relevance of Liberation Theology spread beyond the Latin American region and influenced the creation of similar Christian movements all over the world. One of them, especially relevant to our topic is Dalit Theology, born in India in the 1980s among the lower castes.¹⁷⁵ The legacy of Ambedkar could also be seen in this movement, whose objective was to uplift and empower Dalit communities. We have learned that Ambedkar immersed himself in a two-decade period of study of different world religions, Christianity among them. However, for him, Christianity was foreign to India and, even though it had a potential for social transformation, a movement based on Christianity was completely rejected by him. During Ambedkar's time Christianity was seen as the religion of the colonizer, the British empire; therefore, a conversion to Christianity would have been seen as a support to the British control over India. This would have also had consequences towards the Dalit community, the perception of their own identity, and their possibilities of better conditions within the Indian society. Just before the mass conversion of 1956, Ambedkar held a press conference to announce this event, during which he was asked by reporters about his reasons for adopting Buddhism rather than other faiths, like Christianity:

¹⁷⁵ Schwarz, p. 529.

“But why Buddhism, and not some other faith - such as Islam or Christianity - that has attracted low-caste people in the past?” Alluding to the murderous hatred dividing Hindus and Muslims and the antipathy most Indians felt for the vestiges of colonialism, including the Christian missions, Ambedkar answered carefully, “For all mi differences with Gandhi, I agree with his nonviolent path. And this requires conversion to a religion that is part and parcel of Indian culture. I have taken care that my conversion will not harm the culture and history of this land.”¹⁷⁶

Despite their differences, many similarities between Liberation Theology and Navayana Buddhism can be found, not only in the context in which they were born, but also in their ideas and message. In recent times, an example of this is Engaged Buddhism. According to some scholars, early engaged forms of Buddhism were born out of the contact between liberal Protestantism and Buddhism in South Asian countries. The contact between Christian and Buddhist ideas, spread not only in Asia, but also in Western countries, especially in North America.¹⁷⁷ In a similar way, Liberation Theology also underwent a process of transformation after the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, and the influence of Asian philosophies, which started to reshape its main teachings. Leonardo Boff, as one of its main representatives, is a clear example of this evolution. His philosophical work underwent a process of reception of other philosophical traditions, and today his concept of “integral liberation” can be seen as a result of this. Before analyzing what “integral liberation” means, let us look at how the process of “liberation” was understood and how it evolved, within Liberation Theology and, particularly, in Boff’s philosophy.

During the first decades of the Liberation Theology movement, ideas from Marxism and Socialism gave a conceptual framework to a Catholic worldview deeply influenced by the changes that occurred during the Second Vatican Council and the social message of the Gospels. This resulted in a concept of liberation understood in a collective sense, as the search for freedom from oppressive political, social, or economic structures. This concept of liberation can be regarded as part of the Western philosophical tradition. In the same way, a concept of liberation understood as spiritual realization, in a more personal way, can be regarded as more characteristic of Asian philosophical traditions. It could be said that Ambedkar,

¹⁷⁶ Keer, D. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1971, p. 498. Cited also by Queen, 200, p. 23.

¹⁷⁷ Queen, Christopher B. Ed. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, Simon and Schuster, 2012.

with Navayana philosophy, brings together these two concepts of liberation, in which individual liberation is essentially intertwined with collective liberation and social equality.

From Asia, the traditions that had a major impact in Boff's new concept of integral liberation were Taoist Philosophy and Buddhist Philosophy. Because of the relevance for this work, our focus centres around the Buddhist ideas that Boff incorporated in his new philosophy.

As well as gathering different traditions, the concept of integral liberation involves a transformation of the relation of humanity with the Earth at large. But what exactly is "integral liberation"? Boff refers to integral liberation as "the process of moving toward a world where all human beings can live with dignity in harmony with the great community of beings who make up Gaia, the Living Earth."¹⁷⁸ It is important to notice that Ambedkar's Navayana philosophy does not initially have a focus on environmental concerns, as neither did Liberation Theology. Boff's ideas evolved from an analysis of oppression based on social class to one that includes all living beings, animals and nature at large. Ambedkar's Buddhism is elaborated from a humanistic perspective which puts human-to-human relations, rather than human-to-God relations, at its centre. And even though Ambedkar retains the Buddhist idea of liberation of all sentient beings in its formulations, he does not seem to focus at all on this overarching concept: His main concern is with the societal structures of oppression towards lower classes and women. It is important to point out as well that this was Boff's and Liberation Theology's initial framework. Boff's inclusion of environmental concerns into his philosophy happened during the late seventies and eighties, a time when environmental movements started to have a stronger impact. Ambedkar died in 1956, a time in which environment philosophies had not gathered the momentum experienced by Boff in later decades.

Integral liberation, therefore, would involve individual transformation to create a community based on harmony and dignity among humans, between humans and other sentient beings, and between humans and the Earth at large. This community would be based on the principles of "harmony, peace, and right relationship." Integral liberation then, is the result of a process that involves both individual and collective transformation. In order for this transformation to take place, there is a two-step process.

4.1.3. The Process of Integral Liberation

¹⁷⁸ Boff, Leonardo, Hathaway, Mark. *Tao of Liberation. Exploring the Ecology of Transformation*, Orbis Books, New York, 2009, p. XXV.

Understanding the economic and political system and its underlying paradigm is the first step in the process of integral liberation. This system creates beliefs and attitudes, and both social and mental structures that need to be understood. With this perspective, the second step in the process is to apply the necessary measures to overcome these structures. These measures involve cultivating the specific qualities and actions that lead to individual and social change. Boff also analyses the structures of power and their effects on social justice. For this analysis, Boff's new concept of integral liberation draws from a variety of sources, in particular from Buddhist philosophy. Based on certain Buddhist concepts, he elaborated his view on oppression and its impact on the human psyche.

It is important to notice the use, by both Ambedkar and Boff, of Christianity and Buddhism in their analysis of structures of oppression. Boff, from the Christian tradition, makes use of Buddhism; Ambedkar, in his approach to Buddhism, incorporates Christian elements. Both thinkers are trying to disentangle the mechanisms of oppression of a capitalist society, in Boff's case, and of the caste system, in Ambedkar's case. However, as we have learned, we can find strong differences between them. For Ambedkar, it is critical to create a new philosophical and religious framework for the lower classes. But in order to have the impact and acceptance he thought it required, this new framework needed to create a narrative founded within the Indian tradition. This tradition, however, had been mainly identified with Hinduism. Buddhism had played a minor, almost non-existent role, for many centuries in India. It was, however, born in India, and Ambedkar, with Navayana Buddhism, constructed a narrative Dalits and outcasts of the Indian society could identify with. Boff's philosophy was, from its beginnings, based on the Christian tradition, recognized as such, and aligned with the transformation that the Social Vatican Council brought about during the 1960s. There was extreme opposition to Liberation Theology from the Vatican for decades, particularly during the papacy of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. However, Liberation theologians' use of the teachings of the Gospels to support their ideas and movement, could hardly be questioned. Ambedkar, however, had to radically change the Buddha's message to justify the inclusion of a social concern that did not seem to be present in its origin. Ambedkar claimed that he was bringing the Buddha's original message to light. However, we have seen, the evidence to support this does not seem to be enough. From a philosophical standpoint, Liberation Theology was always grounded on the Gospels'

teachings, whereas Navayana Buddhism, had to create a theoretical foundation hardly found, as Ambedkar stated it, in the history of Buddhism.

Boff's approach analyzes three types of power:¹⁷⁹ "Power-over", "power-with", and "power-from-within". "Power-over" is the power of domination that results in inequality, violence, and a sense of powerlessness in the one who is oppressed. This type of power has consequences at two levels: at a societal level, creating inequality and violence; and at an individual level, creating a feeling of powerlessness within. The second type is "power-with." This power is based on personal respect, and not on authority. It is equally shared with others, and it allows people to act in participatory ways. "Power-from-within" is at the core of what is called "empowerment." It is the power that promotes and sustains life through creativity, healing, and love. It comes from a transformation from within the individual. Societies and organizations contribute to increase it or diminish it. "Power-from-within," for Boff, is also the propeller of educational and political transformation.

In this regard, Buddhist tradition has always been characterized by the analysis of the individual's mind, not only through specific practices like meditation or the training of the mind, which are an intrinsic part of it, but also in the basic teachings of which they are part, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Through them, individuals have the power to understand their suffering, its causes, and realize that they have the power to change. Through them, individuals access a power that would allow them to determine their own lives. Buddhism's main focus has not generally been on political transformation. However, the role of education in the path towards awakening plays a crucial role, particularly in the Mahayana path of the bodhisattva. Boff, does not explicitly refer to these Buddhist elements, and his analysis focuses, as we will see, on the Three Root Evils. However, his transition from the power-over to the power-from-within, is clearly influenced by this.

For Both, in order to overcome the structures of oppression created by systems based on the idea of "power-over", individuals need to access their power-within. However, this could only be accomplished when the internalized sense of powerlessness created by the "power-over" is overcome. For Boff, internalized powerlessness is the result of the impact of societal structures of oppression in the human

¹⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 82.

psyche and it manifests in three types of pathologies. When describing these three pathologies, Boff explicitly refers to the influence of Buddhist thought in his analysis. These three pathologies are similar to the three causes of suffering that Buddhism identifies as the Three Root Evils: greed, hatred, and ignorance. Boff, however, does not use these same terms. He speaks of denial, delusion, and addiction. The pathology of denial in Boff's analysis relates to greed and hatred, as well as ignorance. The pathology of delusion is clearly similar to the Root Evil of ignorance. The pathology of addiction connects with the Buddhist concept of greed.

Denial for Boff means denial of reality, of the structures of power, and also the denial of one's own potential. This type of denial is based on a feeling of self-hatred created by the power-over imposed from the political and economic system to perpetuate the structures of oppression. This hatred directs the individual's oppression towards themselves and does not allow a perception of the wider structures that create it. The denial of a person's potential blocks the development of their capacities to change themselves and transform the world. Denial of reality and of structures of power also blocks compassion towards the suffering of others, another central quality, we have seen, in the Mahayana path of liberation.

The second type of pathology is addiction. Addiction, for Boff, refers not only to substances like alcohol or drugs, but also greed and attachment, central to the Buddhist analysis of suffering, are considered by Boff forms of addiction. In his analysis, the compulsive behaviour of addiction is based on the void left when something is missing. These forms of greed and attachment, these types of addictive behaviours, bring to light a deeper reality, and make evident the void that indeed causes them. Because for Boff, what is ultimately missing, both at an individual and societal level, is a sense of joy, beauty, and love, considered basic human needs. On the Buddhist path, it is generally the cultivation of paramitas that contributes to this type of wholesome life, the type of life that ultimately leads to a Nirvana.

The third type of pathology is delusion, especially in the form of despair. This, for Boff, happens when people see the world as hopeless and think that change is impossible. Ignorance, as the Buddhist counterpart, is made evident in the most basic teachings of the Four Noble Truths. These truths teach that suffering exist, but change is possible and its accomplishment is accessible to anyone through following the Eightfold Path. It is important to highlight that even though Ambedkar questions the Four Noble Truths as usually presented in the Buddhist tradition, his objective was first to dismantle what he saw as

the delusions created by Brahmanic Philosophy and the Hindu caste system and to affirm the possibility of social change. But his negative interpretation of the Four Noble Truths made him transform them and formulate them in a way that would portray a hopeful message, one that he did not see in the traditional presentation of the Four Noble Truths.

4.1.4. Cultivating Will and Compassion

The second step in the process of Boff's integral liberation involves overcoming these pathologies through the cultivation of two elements: will and compassion. Compassion, for Boff, allows the individual to experience interconnection among all elements of reality. It is also necessary in the process of empowerment, because, for him, it is connected, not with the idea of "power-over", but with the "power-from-within." In some traditions compassion may be seen as weakness; however, compassion, from Boff's perspective, puts individuals in touch with alternative sources of power and it increases their conscious participation in life. Compassion would also be the foundation to create liberating communities. These communities, for Boff, are characterized by eliminating oppressive relationships, alleviating addictions, and freeing from disempowerment. They are also characterized by equality, respect, and a "common commitment to growth and transformative action."

In Boff's process of integral liberation, along with compassion, the cultivation of the will is also necessary. Cultivating the will involves reconnecting with the power-within. This, according to Boff, increases the capacity to act in concert with others because it enables identification with other beings. Cultivating the will, in the process of integral liberation, also requires one to develop the capacity of concentration. Increasing this capacity allows individuals and collectives to create a vision of the kind of society they want to live in; a vision that would inspire and propel their actions. In Navayana philosophy, this could be equated with the importance that Ambedkar attributes to the training of the mind and its capacity to create good thoughts. These thoughts would result in good actions, which would eventually bring Nibbana, the kingdom of righteousness. This was Ambedkar's vision. For Boff, this vision includes a dignified lifestyle, a system that cares for all living creatures; new ways of relating that exclude oppression and

inequality; the exercise of power-with and power-within; a new level of consciousness based on interconnection, and compassion between humans and all sentient beings.¹⁸⁰

These two qualities also play an essential role in Buddhism, especially in the bodhisattva's path to liberation, in Mahayana Buddhism. The quality of compassion also in the Buddhist system becomes a tool to access what Boff calls the power-within. On the path towards Nirvana, compassion also channels the will to transform an individual's life, their society, and to help others to do the same. We will see later that Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy is a clear example of this path, which Boff very similarly explains through his process of integral liberation. For Nhat Hanh:

“ Staying in touch with the reality of suffering keeps us sane and nourishes the wellsprings of understanding (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*) in us. It affirms in us the will to practice the bodhisattva's way: “Living beings are numberless; I vow to help by rowing them to the other shore.” If we cut ourselves off from the reality of suffering, this vow will have no meaning...”¹⁸¹

We learned in Chapter 2¹⁸² that *pradnya* and *maitri* are the cornerstones of Navayana Buddhism. Both understanding and compassion, as well as the “Buddha's social message” are the three pillars that Ambedkar established for Navayana Buddhism. Both Ambedkar and Boff's ideas could be paralleled with Nhat Hanh's approach. However, there is a key difference in Navayana philosophy. Both Boff and Nhat Hanh situate the root of human suffering in what Buddhism calls the Three Root Evils, or Boff's “three pathologies,” which we have already discussed. Ambedkar, on the other hand, places the cause of human suffering in social conflict. Social conflict is, then, the problem that needs to be addressed as a priority. Even though for the three of them a psychological dimension is essential, Ambedkar's presentation of Navayana Buddhism does not focus on it or in an analysis of the Three Root Evils. They are indeed part of it, and for Ambedkar, they need to be removed in order to walk on the path to Nibbana. However, his main focus remains on working towards the removal of the oppressive structures created by Chaturvarna and the caste system, and a more psychological dimension is only presented and slightly tackled as a product of these.

¹⁸⁰ Boff and Hathaway, p. 125.

¹⁸¹ Nhat Hahn, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, in Edelglass, p. 423.

¹⁸² 3.4.4. The Philosophy of a New Dhamma.

4.2. Navayana Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism

“Engaged Buddhism” was a term coined by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and it usually refers to a type of Buddhism that applies the teachings of the Buddha to economical, political, or environmental situations. According to Queen,¹⁸³ Ambedkar is one of the leaders who helped define the meaning of Engaged Buddhism. From the mass conversion he led in 1956 to today’s Ambedkarite Movement, Navayana Buddhism is considered a form of Engaged Buddhism characterized by its grass roots involvement and its fight for equality in India. Ambedkar’s interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings seems to be widely accepted among Buddhists in India, to the extent that using the term “Buddhist” would usually be understood as referring to a follower of Ambedkar’s ideas.¹⁸⁴ But “Engaged Buddhism” is a term not only used to refer to Navayana Buddhists. Since 1956, different leaders have weaved the fabric of this movement, leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh, from the Mahayana tradition, Buddhadasa Bikkhu, from the Theravada tradition, or Tenzin Gyatso, from the Tibetan tradition.¹⁸⁵ All of them embarked on a profound revision of Buddhist teachings and their application to social problems. Buddhadasa Bikkhu, for example, wrote more than fifty volumes of scriptural commentary reflecting on possibilities for applying Buddhist teachings to social concerns. These and other contributions to both theory and practice created a new wave of Buddhist engagement today known as Engaged Buddhism.

It is interesting to note that Buddhadasa Bikkhu shares with Ambedkar a rejection of the traditional doctrine of karma, because he saw it as incompatible with the Buddhist conception of sunyata, or emptiness. Buddhadasa also seems to approach Buddhist philosophy from a more rationalist perspective, and he rejects the process of reincarnation. For him, the Buddha’s original teaching is that of no-self, which would make a traditional understanding of rebirth or reincarnation incompatible with any doctrine based on the actual teachings of the Buddha.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Queen, Christopher B. Ed. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, Simon and Schuster, 2012, pages 1-35.

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem.

It is important to highlight that Buddhism had largely disappeared in India, so after the mass conversion of Dalits, the vast majority of Buddhists in India are Ambedkarites.

¹⁸⁵ Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was a Thai scholar and teacher. Tenzin Gyatso is the birth name of the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet and 1989 Nobel Peace laureate.

¹⁸⁶ Powers and Steven, 2017, pages 221-237.

4.2.1. Meditation and Social Change

In section 1.2. What is Engaged Buddhism? we learned three qualities of contemporary engaged Buddhist movements: awareness, identification, and the imperative of action. Awareness, in this context, is understood as the capacity of seeing the interdependence between oneself and the world. Identification is a sense of empathy for all beings. It means not only to become aware of the suffering of others, but also to have the capacity to feel what they feel. The imperative of action is understood as the need to take steps in order to eliminate this suffering. These steps should be taken at a level appropriate to the cause of the suffering. This means that if there is a structural or institutional cause, the action should be taken at a structural or institutional level.

Along with these characteristics, meditation and the discipline of the mind are still essential practices in engaged Buddhist movements. Even though Ambedkar's philosophy does not focus its attention so much on it as in other aspects, the discipline of the mind is also, as a first step, an essential practice in Navayana Buddhism. Ambedkar saw the Buddhist path of liberation as one based on universal values, rationality, and happiness. But accomplishing this would not necessarily be an easy task. An important aspect on the path of liberation is that of discipline, in particular the discipline of the mind. Ambedkar refers to the training of the mind as a type of training that allows the mind to develop at a triple level: in concentration and mindfulness; in order to accomplish free thinking; and in order to think positive thoughts and actions, which would ultimately give the individual the power to do good.¹⁸⁷ In this way, Ambedkar seems to be pointing at the importance of practices such as meditation as a necessary part of any significant social transformation. The training of the mind, for Ambedkar was actually the first step in the processes of individual transformation, an essential element in what he called the Path of Righteousness. For him, this transformation is required in order to also change society. The transformation of the mind is a necessary change in order to end suffering, hatred, and social conflict; and, ultimately in order to bring Nibbana, what Ambedkar called the "kingdom of righteousness," on Earth.

We have previously learned about Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Nibbana and how he radically brings a new meaning of it. For him, Nibbana does not mean the salvation of the soul, but the "happiness

¹⁸⁷ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, p. 75.

of a sentient being.”¹⁸⁸ Nibbana is not related with an experience after death, but it is connected to a state of happiness that takes place “in *Samsara*.”¹⁸⁹ Ultimately, Nibbana for Ambedkar involves the exercise of control over passions so that hatred, delusion, and greed can be prevented or eliminated, and the qualities of compassion and wisdom can be better cultivated and flourish to their highest expression. In this way, even though Ambedkar brings his unique approach to the Buddhist concept of Nibbana, the importance of inner transformation and the stress on the primacy of compassion are essential components of his philosophy, characteristics that he also shares with other contemporary Buddhists teachers.

Pradeep Gokhale,¹⁹⁰ for example, points to the similarities between Ambedkar’s Buddhism and the innovations introduced by the Burmese-Indian teacher Satya Narayan Goenka. Goenka’s Buddhism emphasizes the path of liberation as universal and scientific, and it stresses the importance of Vipassana meditation, a type of meditation in which the training of the mind centres around the sensations of the body. Goenka’s Buddhism also emphasizes morality and it has a strong secular and scientific dimension. For Gokhale, both Goenka and Ambedkar share a similar interpretation of Buddhism; a type of Buddhism that emphasizes morality, is secular and universal in nature, and is in line with contemporary social concerns.

4.2.2. The Bodhisattva and Nirvana

Bodhisattvas play a central role in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and were also analyzed by Ambedkar in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.¹⁹¹ For him, two areas need to be cultivated in order to become a bodhisattva: the Ten Powers and the Ten Paramitas, or perfections. The Ten Powers refer to qualities such as intelligence, brightness, or joy. Along with these, bodhisattvas also need to practice the Ten Paramitas, also called the Path of Virtue. For Ambedkar, this path is reinterpreted in a way that gives each of the ten perfections both an individual and a social dimension. For example, *prajna*, wisdom, is understood as a rational quality that allows one to act virtuously and create a virtuous society. *Karuna*, compas-

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 126.

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁰ Gokhale, Pradeep P. ‘Universal Consequentialism’, in Jondhale and Betz, 2004, pages 120-31.

¹⁹¹ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 49-52.

sion, is directed towards the suffering of the poor. *Maitri*, loving-kindness, is understood as fellowship directed, not only to humans, but to all living beings.

Since the creation of the Ambedkarite movement, many Navayana practitioners have considered Ambedkar a bodhisattva, not only because he would have gathered these qualities, but also because Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism, his message, was so appropriate to their specific historical and social situation.¹⁹² Navayana Buddhism today is followed by between eight and nine million people,¹⁹³ who see the Navayana Dhamma as the authentic source of the Buddha's teachings.

One of the main characteristics of Engaged Buddhism, we have seen, is its reinterpretation of the concept of nirvana. Realizing nirvana may be regarded for some as a highly personal achievement. However, engaged Buddhists, and Ambedkar as well, understand nirvana and liberation as both an individual and collective process, in which economic and institutional change play a great part. Queen refers to the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement as an example of this. Sarvodaya is a Buddhist movement from Sri Lanka, founded in 1958, which creates programs for economic and spiritual development. This movement lists the "ten basic human needs" that must be met for liberation to be possible. These include a "clean and beautiful environment, an adequate and safe water supply, clothing, balanced diet, simple housing, basic health care, communication facilities, energy, education related to life and living, and free access to cultural and spiritual resources."¹⁹⁴

Engaged Buddhist movements also see the Four Noble Truths differently. We previously learned about Ambedkar's questioning of this essential Buddhist teaching, turning it into two main questions: "What is the cause of suffering and unhappiness?" And "how can we remove it?" One of Ambedkar's main concerns was also a certain pessimistic approach attributed to Buddhism. Ambedkar claimed this was not actually the Buddha's perspective. Happiness and liberation accessible to anyone would create optimism and hope.

¹⁹² Tartakov, G.M., 'The Navayana Creation of the Buddha Image' in Jondhale and Beltz, 2004, pages 151-185.

¹⁹³ Religion in India, as of 2019, from wikipedia.org

¹⁹⁴ Harvey, p. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*, 2000, Cambridge University Press, pp. 226-234. Queen, pp. 138-139.

Contemporary engaged Buddhist movements also seem to find a variety of causes of human suffering, from the individual to the societal, and they defend the use of different methods to eliminate it, such as mass education and communication, political activism, legislation, or public relations. Engaged Buddhism could indeed be seen as part of a larger movement of transformation of Buddhism in general. For example, there has been an evolution of spiritual practices such as meditation or empowerment rituals. These practices traditionally performed mostly by bhikkhus, are now disseminated among laity and women. Today, we see the public at large, both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, participating in these practices.¹⁹⁵

4.2.3. Is Engaged Buddhism The Fourth Yana?

Edelglass, in his introduction to Thich Nhat Hanh's *Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*¹⁹⁶ brings up an interesting dichotomy in regards to Engaged Buddhism and what it means for the future of Buddhism. Buddhist leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama see Engaged Buddhism as continuous with early Buddhism. Both of them consider that Buddhism, in its origins, was already concerned with social justice and the suffering caused by institutions or governments.¹⁹⁷ They do not consider Engaged Buddhism a different school. On the contrary, they see that a social concern for the other permeates all schools of Buddhism and has always been part of the Buddhist tradition. Scholars such as Queen, by contrast, see Engaged Buddhism as a new school of Buddhism, the fourth yana or fourth vehicle, after Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. For him and others, Engaged Buddhism meets a specific criteria that sets it apart from the other three yanas. Whereas it gathers most of the themes and techniques included in the other vehicles, like interdependence, compassion, community practice, or right livelihood, Engaged Buddhism "is also endowed with a sensitivity to social injustice, institutional evil,

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, pp. 141-142.

¹⁹⁶ In Edelglass, W., and Garfield, J.L. *Buddhist Philosophy, Essential Readings*, Oxford University Press, 2009. pp. 419-427.

¹⁹⁷ Ambedkar may also be included in this list of leaders. Ambedkar, in his formulation of Navayana Buddhism, saw himself as bringing back the teachings of the Buddha to its original message, removed from the influence and manipulation of Buddhist monks or Brahmanic leaders who, for him, may have wanted to water down or eliminate the social message of the Buddha.

and political oppression as sources of human suffering, that has not been central to the Buddhist analysis in the past.”¹⁹⁸

Winston¹⁹⁹ provides further arguments to support the idea that Engaged Buddhism breaks with the concept of Buddhist ethics predominant in the tradition so far. These arguments are based on the idea that the Buddhist tradition has been characterized by a certain insensitivity to injustice. The first argument he provides is the understanding of nibbana as an other-worldly concept that involves the escape from a sad and unhopeful world. He also points out ~~at~~ the traditional disagreement with a conception of justice that recognizes a kind of disempowered victim. This disagreement is based on the idea that anyone would have the power to transform themselves through following the Buddhist path, so being a victim would rather be a choice than a state that deserves some type of justice. Lastly, he points to the fact that traditional Buddhism has usually agreed with an individual conception of karmic justice that only allows for the improvement of society as long as it is tackled from an individual, rather than a collective basis. We have learned that Ambedkar, decades before, pointed out these same elements of criticism to the Buddhist tradition. However, Ambedkar addressed them not by explicitly proposing a rupture with the tradition, or initiating a new turning of the wheel of Dhamma, but by claiming the recuperation of the “true” teachings of the Buddha. Even though, as we have learned, it is questionable if this was his ultimate intention and he actually did so, this is the way he indeed presented his Navayana Buddhism: as a school that goes back to the original source, and brings back the social teachings that had “always” been part of the Buddha’s original Dhamma. As we have just seen in the cases of Queen and Winston, others present Engaged Buddhism in different, but also radical ways, to the extent of considering it the next turning of the wheel. Edelglass also explains:

“Some critics claim that the Buddhist emphasis on liberation from samsara, the cycle of birth and suffering, has been accompanied by a neglect of worldly liberation. Moreover, critics charge, Buddhists have no deep motivation to work for social justice; in a world governed by the universal justice of karma, there are no innocent victims. The law of karma is said to justify the status quo because worldly suffering

¹⁹⁸ Queen, 2000, p. 25.

¹⁹⁹ Winston, p. 75.

is recognized as the inevitable ripening of karmic consequences. While scholars debate the historical accuracy of this critique, many contemporary Buddhist leaders, in Asia and in the West, have been working to formulate Buddhist responses to worldly suffering. Engaged Buddhists argue that social and institutional violence, sometimes veiled, is often pervasive and difficult to subvert, even as it causes extensive and extreme suffering. Therefore, Buddhists, who have always been concerned with suffering and violence, are called to take action against social and institutional oppression and injustice. As the Dalai Lama argues, we have a “universal responsibility.”²⁰⁰

Edelglass here is pointing at Engaged Buddhism as a new interpretation of Buddhist teachings, but accepting engaged forms of Buddhism as part of the tradition, of which the Dalai Lama would be an example of. Engaged Buddhism is seen, in this case, as an approach to the Buddha’s teachings that arose in the twentieth century as a response to colonialism, war, social injustice, the destruction of the environment, and oppressive governments. In this approach, an individual liberation from samsara did not seem to be enough when different forms of injustice were still pervasive throughout the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh, as one of the most prominent examples of engaged Buddhist leaders, also supports the idea that Engaged Buddhism continues with the Buddhist tradition and practices. From this perspective, it could be said that Engaged Buddhism is founded in three main pillars of the traditional Buddhist doctrines: The Four Noble Truths, Buddhist ethics, and Buddhist philosophical concepts. The Four Noble Truths is the first element that allows Engaged Buddhism to continue the tradition. This points to a sharp difference between Ambedkar, who questioned the authenticity of the Four Noble Truths, and Nhat Hanh. For Nhat Hanh, through the Four Noble Truths, Buddhists can identify suffering as the root of humanity’s concerns, and work towards its removal. The question whether suffering is caused by political or economic structures, would allow Buddhists to direct their efforts to work towards its removal wherever the origin is found. This difference between Nhat Hanh and Ambedkar’s conception of the Four Noble Truths is analyzed in more detail in the next section. However, as an introduction to it, it could be said that for Ambedkar, the way these truths had been traditionally formulated had generally led to an un-

²⁰⁰ In Edelglass and Garfield, p. 419.

hopeful vision of the world that disempowered the individual and societies from the possibility of change, creating a pessimistic vision, opposed to the actual potentiality for happiness intrinsic to all.

Like Nhat Hanh, those who support the idea that Engaged Buddhism is a continuation of the Buddhist tradition, defend Buddhist ethics as its second pillar. Teachings such as right livelihood, the bodhisattva ideal, skillful means in alleviating suffering, abstaining from harming others, compassion, loving-kindness, or generosity. All these teachings, essential in the engaged Buddhist movement, have always belonged to the Buddhist tradition, they are all concerned with the other, and they all involve alleviating, if not removing, the suffering of others. Most, if not all these ethical teachings, can be applied in both an individual and a collective way, and they can also be applied in institutions and in a structural way.

The third pillar in the continuation between Engaged Buddhism and the Buddhist tradition would be found in Buddhist philosophical concepts, particularly in three categories: interdependence and non duality; selflessness and emptiness; and Buddha-nature.²⁰¹ Buddha-nature teaches the intrinsic capacity of all sentient beings to be enlightened. According to this teaching, all sentient beings are born with the capacity to wake up to the path of liberation for themselves and for others; therefore, all sentient beings deserve to be treated in terms of equality, with respect and dignity. The concepts of selflessness and emptiness help to eliminate fears and habits that cause the suffering of others. They also help to take action in order to reduce their suffering, because they allow one to see that harm caused to others is ultimately harm caused to oneself. This leads to the concepts of interdependence and non duality. These have taught Buddhists for thousands of years that self and other are not fundamentally different, that the suffering caused to others is ultimately caused to oneself, and that we are ultimately responsible for each other.

From this perspective, Engaged Buddhism retains the most central teachings of the Buddhist tradition, having a double dimension of self-cultivation and social awareness. In a world that is increasingly conscious of its interdependence, Buddhism has evolved to integrate these dimensions, an integration that has been less regarded in the past. My hypothesis is that Engaged Buddhism has emerged as a natural evolution of Buddhist history, accepting most of its core teachings but adapting itself to a radically new

²⁰¹ Ibid, p. 420.

reality from the one the Buddha or other Buddhists in history lived. The idea of Engaged Buddhism as the fourth yana cannot be accepted, in my view, since the elements of continuity with the tradition are more substantial than the ones of rupture. However, due to the novelty of this movement, it seems still early to give a definite answer as to how these changes will progress. The comparison between the figures of Ambedkar and Thich Nhat Hanh, as representatives of this movement and its future, may help to understand the indeed wide range of approaches that can be found within what is called Engaged Buddhism, and to bring further light to the future of Engaged Buddhism.

4.3. Ambedkar and Thich Nhat Hanh

In all accounts of the Buddha's early life, his first experience of enlightenment leads him to the realization of the causes of human suffering. In Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, this realization brings the Buddha to formulating his two main questions, equivalent to the Four Noble Truths. With them, he finds himself at a crossroads: should he dedicate his life to transforming himself or transform himself while changing the world? Ambedkar's Buddha chooses the second option. He decides to take action - not stay on the margin, but to engage in society and work towards the elimination of suffering within the human collective. This is the core of Ambedkar's new philosophy and this, for some, is considered the first stone of what later became the Engaged Buddhist movement.

Both Ambedkar and Thich Nhat Hanh are usually given as examples of Engaged Buddhist leaders and initiators of the Engaged Buddhist movement. To what extent are they comparable? What are some similarities and differences between them? Thich Nhat Hanh entered a Buddhist monastery at the age of sixteen whereas Ambedkar officially converted to Buddhism only a few weeks before he died. Thich Nhat Hanh is seen around the world as a model of true Buddhism, whereas Navayana Buddhism, for some, cannot even be considered Buddhism at all. However, even though Ambedkar seems to question key elements of Buddhism, a closer analysis of his approach suggests that rather than a radical rejection of concepts such as the Four Noble Truths or Nirvana, he brings a different interpretation that would, in the end, serve to oppose the Hindu caste system. Although Ambedkar seems to strongly criticize and eliminate the Four Noble Truths, this thesis suggests that, what Ambedkar actually does is to reformulate them, but in a way that could clearly support his call for action. Nhat Hanh, on the other hand, does not criticize them, but reinterprets them in a way that also supports his call for action. We will see in more detail in the sec-

tion “Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism that, for Nhat Hanh, it is through the Four Noble Truths that human suffering can be identified, addressed and, ultimately, removed, whether it is done through an individual practice or a collective action. Ambedkar deals with the Four Noble Truths by formulating two questions that identify human suffering and compel its removal through individual, collective, or institutional action.”²⁰²

4.3.1. Hermeneutic Principles

It is interesting to notice how both Ambedkar and Nhat Hanh perceive the need to identify what are authentic Buddhist teachings. In section 3.5. we learned about Ambedkar’s hermeneutic principles. Ambedkar elaborated them as a tool to establish a clear distinction between what he claimed were the Buddha’s original teachings and what, for him, Brahmanic philosophy might have falsely introduced as Buddha’s Dhamma. His main purpose with this was to ultimately eliminate those elements in the Buddha’s teachings that could lead to the discrimination of Untouchables, whom he hoped would soon adopt the Navayana Dhamma as their moral framework. Thich Nhat Hanh, on his part, also established a set of principles that would guide anyone to recognize the authentic teachings of the Buddha.²⁰³ But in what ways are they similar or different to Ambedkar’s? Ambedkar’s hermeneutic principles are formulated as a tool to support the lower classes of India in the creation of a new politico-religious movement. Nhat Hanh explicitly recognized his as embedded in the Buddhist tradition, and he provides evidence of this continuity in the explanation of his three interpretative tools.

Ambedkar’s principles to interpret the Buddha’s teachings are certainty, social benefit, and rationality. Nhat Hanh’s are impermanence, non-self, and nirvana, and he calls them the “three Dharma Seals.”²⁰⁴ In line with traditional Buddhist philosophy, impermanence for Nhat Hanh, refers to the changing nature of things. In his work *You Are Here*, he says:

“Everything is constantly changing. Nothing has a permanent identity. If things were not permanent, growth would be impossible, and manifestation would be impossible (...) Impermanence is the

²⁰² We analyzed this issue in section 3.1. of this thesis, “The Two Main Questions.”

²⁰³ Thich Nhat Hahn, *You are here*. Shambhala Publications, Boston, 2009. Pages. 103-114.

²⁰⁴ The Three Dharma Seals is a concept commonly used in East Asian Buddhism but differs from the understanding of Dharma seals in the Theravada and the Vajrayana traditions.

very heart of life. Our home lies in impermanence. Take the example of a dictatorship. How would it be if that were permanent? Impermanence is what puts an end to dictatorship. It's what puts an end to hatred and suffering, as well. We need impermanence to transform them."²⁰⁵

From this approach, the changing nature of reality also characterizes the political and social dimensions. In fact, it is in this dimension that change is most evident. Nothing is permanent and the evolution of societies and individuals within them shows their constant transformation and change. The end of a dictatorship would happen as a result of the way in which individuals engage in the social and political structures of their time, which is part of the process of evolution and of the changing reality itself.

Based on this principle, Nhat Hanh also rejects the idea of soul, rebirth, and reincarnation, usually present in more popular forms of Buddhism. It is important to remember that Ambedkar also rejects these three concepts as commonly understood in Buddhism. Both Nhat Hanh and Ambedkar see them as contradictory with the original teachings of the Buddha. Ambedkar goes a step beyond when pointing at Brahmanism as the source of these beliefs being introduced into Buddhism. Nhat Hanh, on his part, rejects any Buddhist teaching that would imply the idea of a permanent identity, as soul, rebirth, and reincarnation do. He says "If you detect in a teaching any allusion to the presence of a permanent entity or self, then you will know that this teaching is not authentically Buddhist, even if it makes use of Buddhist terminology. An authentic Buddhist teaching must bear the mark of impermanence."²⁰⁶ As we will see in the following paragraphs, Nhat Hanh recognizes the existence of a historical dimension, in which birth and death exist. However, from an ultimate perspective, neither birth nor death exist. For him, this ultimate reality is Nirvana.

Nhat Hanh's second principle is that of no-self, or anatta. We have learned that this is also one of the elements of Ambedkar's theory of karma, which he uses to reject its Brahmanic interpretation. Ambedkar focuses, however, on the idea of no-soul, rather than "no-self", which is quite significant. Ambedkar wants to question the effects of karma on a present life as carried on from a past life, whereas Nhat Hanh's uses this principle to connect the idea of no-self with that of interbeing, with interconnectedness

²⁰⁵ Nhat Hahn, p. 104.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 106.

of everything. He says, “But the flower is empty of one thing: a separate existence. It is empty of any separate entity called self. (...) The one contains all. That is the insight of Buddhism. If you practice deep looking, you will discover this truth, the mystery of interbeing: the one contains all.”²⁰⁷ Nhat hanh, again, brings an approach clearly in line with the Buddhist tradition, one that Ambedkar leaves behind in his new Theory of Anatta, as we learned in section 3.6.

The third mark of an authentic Buddhist teaching for Nhat Hanh is Nirvana. Nirvana for him means extinction, the extinction of all concepts, the extinction of all opposites. In regards to Nirvana he says:

“There are two dimensions to reality. One is called the historical dimension, and the other is called the ultimate dimension. Suppose we are looking at the ocean. On the surface we see waves rising and falling. From the point of view of the waves, there is birth and death, high and low, rising and falling. There are distinctions between waves. But each wave is made of a substance called water. It is a wave, but at the same time, it is water. Concepts such as birth and death, higher and lower, rising and falling apply only to the waves, not the the water itself. So the waves represent the historical dimension, and the water represents the ultimate dimension. When we look deeply at our own nature, we can get in touch with its ultimate reality. This ultimate nature is free of birth, free of death, free from any notion such as high, low, this, that, and so forth. In Buddhism, we call this nirvana, or "suchness." Nirvana is the extinction of all concepts, such as existence, nonexistence, death, and birth.”²⁰⁸

This is a key difference that sets both Nhat Hanh and Ambedkar clearly apart. We learned before that Ambedkar calls Nirvana, “the kingdom of righteousness,” which certainly involves the end of any type of discrimination, particularly the ones based on caste, class, or gender. Nirvana for him also means equality and dignity for all members of society, and an equal society involves the elimination of concepts such as caste, class or gender, which create the discrimination that the caste system is based on. However, Nhat Hanh’s understanding of Nirvana, goes much beyond this. Ambedkar, for Nhat Hanh, would still be dealing with the historical dimension, when describing what for him was Nirvana. However, for Nhat

²⁰⁷ Ibidem.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 40.

Hanh, and for the Buddhist tradition, Nirvana involves the realization of a type of reality in which not even the ideas of existence, birth, or death have a part. Ambedkar, due to his political and social aims, is not interested in entering into this approach to Nirvana, and provides a theory of Nibbana whose aim, we have learned, is to become the basis of the aspirations of Dalits and lower classes.

4.3.2. Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism

Nhat Hanh outlined in 1966 his principles of Engaged Buddhism, comprised in what he then called “the fourteen rules for the Order of Interbeing.”²⁰⁹ A comparison between these principles and Ambedkar’s view can provide a wider perspective as to how similar or different these two contemporary leaders are. Of Nhat Hanh’s fourteen principles, the ones selected for this comparison are freedom of thought, awareness of suffering, protecting the Sangha, generosity, and reverence for life.

Awareness of suffering is the fourth guideline, formulated as “looking deeply at the nature of suffering”. For Nhat Hanh, this awareness necessarily leads to the development of compassion, which would ultimately lead to finding ways to eliminate that suffering. Nhat Hanh bases this guideline on the Four Noble Truths. Interestingly enough, the Four Noble Truths were for Ambedkar one of the Buddhist marks that makes Buddhism pessimistic. However, for Nhat Hanh, it is precisely the Four Noble Truths that lead to the possibility of eliminating human suffering, and therefore the birth of hope and humanity’s potential for good. He says, “If the First Truth explains the presence of suffering in life, the Third Truth encourages us to touch life’s joy and peace. When people say that Buddhism is pessimistic, it is because they are stressing the First Truth and overlooking the Third. Mahayana Buddhism takes great care to emphasize the Third Truth.”²¹⁰ In this sense, both agree on an optimistic view: for them, Buddhism itself is hopeful because it believes in the human potential to create a better society, and it provides the tools to do so.

But how is it possible that the Four Noble Truths lead Nhat Hanh to an optimistic approach to Buddhism, while Ambedkar sees them as the source of its apparent pessimism? As we have learned, Ambedkar was greatly influenced by Western philosophy. Even when it comes to Buddhism, some of his sources were European Buddhist scholars like, Hermann Oldenberg, whom we talked about in Chapter 2.

²⁰⁹ He later reformulated them as “the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings for Engaged Buddhism.” Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism”, in Edelglass, p. 421.

²¹⁰ Ibid, p. 422.

Oldenberg questioned an individualistic approach to the Buddha's teachings. According to him, it was in the rewriting of the Buddha's Dhamma by monastic communities that there was a switch from an original focus on collective suffering to an individual approach to it. Ambekdar used Oldenberg's work to support his criticism of the Four Noble Truths and to consider them as not originally Buddhist. However, Ambedkar does not seem to preserve much of the Buddhist tradition in this point. The reason for this may lie in the influence that Christianity had on Ambedkar, as well as in other leaders that brought radical changes to the Buddhist tradition. In this regard, Queen's analysis of Engaged Buddhist leaders, which points at the influence that Christianity had in the introduction of an optimistic approach within the Buddhist tradition may be revealing.²¹¹

Some of the Buddhists leaders Queen analyzes are the American Henry Steel Olcott, the Sri Lankan Anagarika Dharmapala, and B.R. Ambedkar. For him, the three Buddhist leaders considered optimism and joy as intrinsic parts of the Buddha's original path. Queen traces this idea back to an interpretation of Buddhism made in the English-speaking world at the end of nineteenth century. In the late-Victorian age "Protestants, free-thinkers, agnostics, and social reformers" felt a strong appeal for Indian philosophy and religion, Western thinkers saw Buddhism, not as a religion of "pessimism, resignation, and retreat, but a vigorous religion of optimism and activism."²¹² The influence of this type of liberal Protestantism, characterized as being progressive, rational, and worldly, seems to perfectly fit with the strong influence that Ambedkar experienced, not only from an academic perspective, but also considering his upbringing and education in a British and North American context, in his approach of the Four Noble Truths, and of Buddhism as a whole.

Another important component of Nhat Hanh's fourth guideline is its connection with the idea of engagement. The training of the mind and mindfulness practices are essential for any Buddhist practitioner. However, the engagement in the world, what in Ambedkar we have called "the imperative of action," also takes especial relevance. In this regard, Nhat Hanh says, "Teachers who say not to pay attention to

²¹¹ Queen extract these ideas from *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*, written by Obeyesekere and Richard Gomrich, as well as from Obeyesekere's article "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon."

²¹² Queen, 'Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation' in Queen and King, 1996, p. 30.

the problems of the world like hunger, war, oppression, and social injustice, who say that we should only practice, have not understood deeply enough the meaning of Mahayana. Of course, we should practice counting the breath, meditation, and *sutra* study, but what is the purpose of doing these things? It is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going on in the world is also going on within ourselves, and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we will not refuse to take a position or to act.”²¹³ Ambedkar hardly refers directly to practices such as breathing, meditation or *sutra* study. He talks about the training of the mind, but a training that sets the foundation for an ethical and political practice. He also encourages the readings of the Buddha’s teachings, but through the lenses he provides with his “hermeneutic principles.” Ambedkar shares with Nhat Hanh the importance of a spiritual and political practice. However, Ambedkar’s reference to these types of practices, so embedded in the Buddhist tradition, is almost non-existent.

Both thinkers show further differences in their treatment of the idea of “freedom of thought.” Both Ambedkar and Nhat Hanh make it a fundamental tenet of their Buddhist approach. Ambedkar, however, understands it as freeing one’s mind from superstitions and supernatural beliefs, while Nhat Hanh views it as the commitment not to “impose our views on others” through authority, or indoctrination. For Ambedkar, freeing one’s mind from superstitions and supernatural beliefs is essential in order to break apart from the Brahmanic tradition. This philosophy sets the foundations for the discrimination of Dalits and the tools of rationality and free thought will allow one to expose the injustice that Brahmanic beliefs involve. Nhat Hanh also understands freedom of thought within a political dimension. However, he sees it as more closely connected with a rejection of fanaticism and narrowness, and also with the freedom of choosing and expressing one’s own views. Ambedkar’s purpose is to dismantle a tradition; Nhat Hanh’s is to allow the right of others to be different and to choose what they want to believe in.

A common point between them is the importance of raising one’s voice to stand up against oppression and injustice. However, Nhat Hanh, emphasizes this role as part of the Sangha, that is, as part of the religious community. Nhat Hanh, as a Buddhist monk, entered the first Buddhist community at the age of sixteen. Ambedkar, from a radically different approach, opposes the way monastic life and reli-

²¹³ Ibidem.

gious communities had been organized in the Buddhist tradition. Ambedkar also sees the role Buddhist bikkhus had played in Buddhism so far similar to that of servants rather than active citizens of their societies.²¹⁴

As we have seen, the Four Noble Truths, for Ambedkar, are a deterrent to hope and social engagement, whereas for Nhat Hanh, they are fundamental tools for social transformation. For Nhat Hanh, the Four Noble Truths become the Sangha's basic tool for taking action and influencing society. He says,

“A spiritual community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice (...) This should be done with a clear voice, based on the principles of the Four Noble Truths. The truth concerning the unjust situation should be fully exposed (the First Truth: suffering). The various causes of injustice should be enumerated (the Second Truth: the causes of suffering) The purpose and desire for removing the injustices should be made obvious (the Third Truth: the removal of suffering). Although religious communities are not political powers, they can use their influence to change society. Speaking out is the first step, proposing and supporting appropriate measures for change is the next. Most important is to transcend all partisan conflicts. The voice of caring and understanding must be distinct from the voice of ambition.”²¹⁵

Lastly, both of them, emphasize the existence of conflict as a source of suffering. Nhat Hanh situates conflict as the cause of much suffering in the world, whereas for Ambedkar, conflict is *the* root of human suffering. For Nhat Hanh, this widespread conflict should be the impetus towards establishing a commitment to finding the end to suffering, both at an individual and collective level. He says, “*Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict*, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence in our daily lives, to promote peace education, mindful mediation, and reconciliation within families, communities, nations, and in the world.”²¹⁶

4.3.3. Two Leaders: Conclusion

When comparing Ambedkar with Thich Nhat Hanh, we see that Nhat Hanh initiates his movement from the perspective of an already Buddhist monk and he transitions to a position of social engage-

²¹⁴ *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, pp. 222-245.

²¹⁵ Nhat Hanh, “The Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism”, in Edelglass, p. 425.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 426.

ment due, to a great extent, to the war his country was suffering. Ambedkar, on the other hand, moves from the position of a political leader, that is, of social engagement, and it is from that position that he approaches Buddhism: he realized that the transformation of the Indian society required a spiritual transformation, that would only be possible with a new philosophical framework. Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism encompasses this societal transformation and sees the process of liberation as a collective one: for him, there is no liberation of one without the liberation of all. Ambedkar was a political leader who approached Buddhism from a political perspective. Ambedkar only converted to Buddhism at the end of his life, at the time when he announced the creation of his new school. Although similarities can be found between them, both leaders' contexts, purposes, and influences create a type of Buddhism that, even though some situate within the umbrella of Engaged Buddhism, profound differences are found between them from both a philosophical and a political perspective. A broad interpretation of what Engaged Buddhism is places them within the same movement. However, whereas Thich Nhat Hanh embraces the Buddhist tradition from a novel approach, Ambedkar's transformation through Navayana Buddhism leaves some of its main elements in a position hardly recognizable as part of this same tradition.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed the main innovations that Ambedkar introduced to the Buddha's teachings through his work *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. This analysis has unfolded around the transformation of the Four Noble Truths into the Two Main Questions, the Three Paths to The End of Suffering, the Theory of Karma, and the theory of Nibbana. My conclusion is that Ambedkar creates a social philosophy based on Buddhist ideas, which breaks with the Hindu tradition and addresses the inequality suffered by Dalits and other lower classes in India, who saw their basic human condition suppressed for thousands of years under the Brahmanic societal structure. The social inequality Ambedkar deals with has, for him, roots in the philosophy of Brahmanism, and its elimination requires a transformation, a radical change of consciousness. For Navayana Buddhism, at the root of this inequality lies also the root of all human suffering. Human suffering and unhappiness is the result of the conflict between classes, and Navayana Buddhism would have the power to eliminate it.

This thesis addressed first Ambedkar's transformation of the Four Noble Truths. Finding the root of human suffering means answering the most important questions of human existence. This is the star-

ting point of the Buddha, and this is also the first step in the Navayana Buddhist path. Ambedkar's Buddhism, we have learned, is based on two main pillars: the Theory of Karma and the Theory of Nibbana. Through the analysis of Karma, two important theories have also been addressed: the Theory of Anatta, or No-Soul, on one hand, and the Theory of Rebirth, on the other hand. On Ambedkar's reading of the Theory of No-Soul, transmigration is not possible, and he proposes a new theory of re-birth that allows one to understand in a new way the circle of life and death. Ambedkar's theory of re-birth, as we analyzed it, tries to incorporate the latest scientific discoveries in Physics and Genetics, thereby integrating the ancient theory with the advancements of his time. Finally, the Navayana approach to the Buddha's teachings includes a new interpretation of Nibbana. This is a type of Nibbana that includes both an individual and a societal dimension. For Ambedkar, the removal of human suffering could be done through following a threefold path, the Path of Purity, the Path of Righteousness, and the Path of Virtue. For the accomplishment of Nibbana, the last two play an essential role. The Path of Righteousness is similar to the Eightfold Path. Of its eight constituents, Samma Ditti and Samma Samadhi are key in the process. The Path of Virtue follows the process of cultivation of the Ten Paramitas, with Karuna, Maitri, and Pradjna at the centre of the new Dhamma.

Ambedkar's whole understanding of the Buddha's teachings is permeated by the importance of taking action. The Buddha's Dhamma was formulated fundamentally to be implemented in the lives of individuals and groups in order to transform their lives, to remove suffering, to bring love and compassion, and to realize the deeper truths of the nature of reality. The Buddha's Dhamma is essentially experiential and it was formulated to be practiced. Ambekdar understood the Buddha's call to action as transforming a person's life, rather than only approaching life's issues from a theoretical point of view. Williams, Tribe and Wynne express this same idea in a compelling way when they say that "the Buddha's concern is not discussion. It is not pondering or mulling things over. It is action based on an acceptance not of some abstract philosophizing but rather specifically of the Dharma rediscovered by the Buddha. (...) So long as one insists on an answer first, one will never be liberated."²¹⁷ In this respect, Ambedkar's Navayana vehicle is continuous with the Buddhist tradition. He also understood the Buddha's message as

²¹⁷ Williams, Tribe and Wynne, p. 26.

calling for deep self-transformation and change in one's life. His work, and particularly *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, set the philosophical foundation for a practice. This practice would lead to the transformation not only of the individual, but of the society as a whole. Thus, Ambedkar and the Buddha both had the aim of a radical change, but Ambedkar brought a new approach to the Buddha's teachings, creating a social philosophy that would break with the Hindu tradition and would serve to empower women and the lower castes.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism responded to a historical situation created by the Hindu caste system in two ways: It created this philosophy of social transformation and political change, and it founded Navayana Buddhism as a religion. Navayana Buddhism is a minority religion in India today, but it is followed by approximately eight million people and it is considered part of the Engaged Buddhist movement.

Ambedkar converted to Buddhism only months before the end of his life, thereby creating the Navayana movement. This may raise the question of whether his adoption of Buddhism was a religious conversion in the traditional sense, or a political act. This political act would have the intention of leaving a social legacy which others could use to continue the Dalit movement. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* created a philosophy of social transformation, and became the foundational text of a Buddhist movement in India and an inspiration for many in the Engaged Buddhist movement. Queen claims that Ambedkar and Buddhist leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh initiated the fourth turning of the wheel in Buddhist history. This thesis work does not support this claim. Navayana Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism in particular have brought a different approach in the Buddhist landscape, but not to the extent of creating a fourth school of Buddhism, separated from Mahayana, Theravada, or Vajrayana. Navayana Buddhism can be seen also as a secular form of Buddhism, and today be considered as part of the movement known as "Secular Buddhism," which has reached popularity in Western countries. The legacy of Ambedkar's philosophy in India is also evident, at a political, social, and religious level.

Ambedkar was not interested in arguing about what Buddhist school Navayana pertained to. He wanted to embrace the best values of each existing school in order to create a philosophical framework and a social movement that would end Dalit oppression. Ambedkar's main concern was to end the inequality suffered by millions in the Indian society and, through his philosophy, he was certainly able to set the

foundation for a deep transformation. The Indian Constitution is a result of this, as well as the number of groups and movements inspired by his ideas. The fact that some, like Queen, see him as one of the founders not only of a new school of Buddhism, but as one of the initiators of the fourth turning of the wheel, is significant enough to consider this claim. This thesis does not support it, but it definitely sees how Ambedkar takes the relation between Buddhism and social action to a new level. Its philosophical foundation is the legacy he left in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In India, Ambedkar is a hero for Dalits, a powerful consciousness raiser, and will continue to be so. His legacy will provide an inspiration for millions of people for years to come.

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