CHAPTER THREE

BUDDHISM CONFRONTED WITH BRAHMANISM

3.1 A Courtly Challenge

The preceding chapters have shown that the revised form of Brahmanism that had come to the fore during and especially after the Maurya empire was quickly becoming a major competitor for royal support. In this competition the Brahmins had several advantages which the Buddhists had not. The Brahmins, for example, had always been involved in affairs of state, and were therefore well prepared to take on tasks such as counselling the king. The Brahmins, moreover, had clear ideas about society, how it should be and how it could and should be governed. They could advise and encourage the king in his political ambitions, and did not hesitate to justify his military ventures if that seemed fruitful. The Buddhists, if they wanted to be heard at court, had to be able to give some sensible advice, too. They had to develop some ideas as to what society should be like and how it should be governed. They had to have notions about war and peace, and other issues related to statecraft.¹

The Buddhists were aware of all this, and had been aware of it from an early date onward. Already some ancient discourses address these questions. The challenge was however daunting. Buddhist thinkers were not and could not be as pragmatic as their brahmanical confreres. Unlike Brahmanism, Buddhism did not start out as a vision of society, even less as a model for governing a state. It taught a path to escape from rebirth, and following this path implied leaving society. The nature of the society left behind was of little concern to those who decided to follow the teaching of the Buddha.²

This initial situation did not last long. Buddhism soon became the victim of its own success. The community of monks and nuns

² In his contacts with contemporary kings, the Buddha abstained from giving them political advice, if the early sources are to be trusted; Bareau, 1993: 38.
organized itself, and monasteries were created. Questions regarding the interaction between the Buddhist community and society at large became inevitable. In order to build monasteries and places of worship, a steady stream of gifts from donors was necessary. The Buddhists could not for ever go on hiding their heads in the sand as far as questions of society and its political organization were concerned. But the challenge they had to face was, as said above, daunting.

Consider first a discourse in the ancient Buddhist canon that deals with the organization of society and explains how it came to be what it is. This text, the Aggañña Sutta, criticizes the Brahmanical vision of society and rejects the notion according to which Brahmins are fundamentally different from all other members of society. In this discourse a Brahmin justifies his belief in the pre-eminence of his caste-class with the help of a myth which recounts that Brahmins were born from the mouth of the Creator God. The Aggañña Sutta does not accept this myth, and presents a creation story of its own. In this alternative story, differences between people came about as a result of differences of behaviour in some unspecified past. Brahmins, for example, are the descendants of people who meditated or compiled books. They yet have a common ancestry with all other caste-classes of society. The kingly caste-class came about when people chose one from among themselves to impose order on society. Once again the text emphasizes the common origin of the king with the other caste-classes.

The Aggañña Sutta, while criticizing Brahmanical ideas, yet adopts some of them. It criticizes the notion that there is a fundamental difference between the four caste-classes of society as taught by the Brahmins, yet accepts this division as being social reality. It also accepts without discussion that kings behave the way they do. In the words of the Aggañña Sutta, a king is a being who, appointed by the rest of the population, “would show anger where anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment” (tr. p. 413). No further guidelines are provided.

Yet this is where the shoe pinches. Buddhism teaches a path that leads to liberation. This path is open to all human beings, not just Brahmins or certain others. Buddhism is therefore bound to encourage

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3 See note 25 to chapter 1, above.
4 For a discussion of gifts to Buddhist monasteries in Gujarat, and of the economic position of such monasteries in North India in general, see Njammasch, 2001: 199 f.