

SARKAR AND THE BUDDHA'S FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS¹

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Introduction

In 1955, an obscure socio-spiritual organization dedicated to the twin aims of individual spiritual realization and social service was formed in the state of Bihar, India. It was named Ananda Marga Pracaraka Sangha (abbreviated AM), literally translated as "Community for the Propagation of the Path of Bliss". AM stands alongside other New Religious Movements (NRM's) of Indian origin which have captured the imagination and allegiance of a substantial number of followers both in Asia and in the West. It is in much the same genre as NRM's such as Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the International Society for Krsna Consciousness (ISKCON). The founder of AM was a charismatic spiritualist and visionary, Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar.

Sarkar based his spiritual philosophy on the Indian episteme² of tantra. In his view, tantra originally includes all the various branches of yoga (e.g. *karma*, *jnana*, *bhakti*, *raja*, *hatha*, *kundalini*, and *mantra*) as well as Buddhist tantra, Taoist yoga, and Zen.³ Sarkar's tantra, which he describes as *advaitadvaitadvaita*, is fundamentally non-dualistic but leaves room for pluralism and spiritual devotionism. The term *advaitadvaitadvaita* is difficult to translate but denotes a worldview that can be best described as non-dualistic-cum-dualistic monism. Sarkar sees the world as essentially non-dual, originating in pure consciousness, which transforms itself into a multiplicity of relative entities during the process of world evolution, and which finally merges into the singularity of consciousness at its omega point.

The central concept is that of bliss (Sanskrit: *ananda*) as the source, sustenance, and desideratum of the entire created order, both animate and inanimate. This bliss, defined as infinite happiness, is the innate goal of every entity, and of human beings especially. It is the misguided and misplaced search for this bliss, Sarkar asserts, that results in the human obsession with limited, crude pleasures and material or psychic objects of gratification, and in consequence a state of dissatisfaction and pain. For Sarkar, the limited and coarse cannot fulfil the need for the unlimited and subtle. It is only with the full realization of *ananda*, which is in essence the "Supreme Consciousness" or "*Brahma*",⁴ that the human thirst for limitlessness is permanently quenched. Lest *ananda* be seen solely as a distant dream, Sarkar stresses that this very world we live in is sustained in bliss, is constituted of bliss, and evolves in bliss. A person only needs to realize this truth in the here-and-now in order to experience the *summum bonum* of infinite happiness.

Sarkar's perspective contrasts interestingly with Gotama Buddha's central notion of the Four Noble Truths, resting on the ubiquitous experience of suffering or unsatisfactoriness (Pali: *dukkha*) in life (and in death and rebirth). Gotama asserts that all sentient experience (even the highly refined states of meditative consciousness known as *jhanas*), and correspondingly, the entire world, is marked with unsatisfactoriness. This existential *dukkha* is a result of human craving rooted in ignorance, which is the origin of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). The goal of each sentient being is thus to eradicate this ignorance-craving complex and free itself from *samsara* now and forever. Each individual may take this soteriological quest as his/her goal, but the universe as a whole, does not proceed towards any final desideratum. The universe moves on in a causally linked fashion driven by the individual and collective volitional actions (*karma*) of its inhabitants.

At this juncture, it is necessary to identify more precisely the rationale underlying the present comparative study. First, both Sarkar's and Gotama's soteriological praxis can be located within the Indian yogic model of material detachment and intense self-introspection. While Sarkar broadly characterised his cosmology as tantric in essence, he never failed to highlight its yogic purpose and method as far as attaining liberation is concerned. Likewise, Gotama very clearly appropriated the yogic methods of concentration and meditation, and had trained under two teachers presumably from the Samkhya-Yogic tradition prior to his enlightenment. This is evidenced in his descriptions, in many of his discourses, of concentrative states known as *jhanas* and *arupas*. In this respect, it is worthwhile examining how Sarkar's tantric yoga might resemble or differ from the yoga of Gotama. Second, Sarkar made a number of references to the Buddha and commented, in two separate discourses, on the Buddha's four noble truths and eightfold path. Apart from his emphasis on Siva and Krsna as great historical and spiritual personalities (perhaps to legitimise his own role within a larger Indian context), Sarkar seems to have given some importance to the Buddha, mentioning him not infrequently. It appears that Sarkar was eager to demarcate his approach from that of the Buddha, but yet was in some respects admiring of the latter's contribution to ethics and spirituality. It is thus instructive to see how Sarkar has read and portrayed Gotama's message and to evaluate if his interpretation of Gotama is accurate and justifiable to Buddhists. It is also instructive to examine how Sarkar has attempted to offer an alternative approach to cosmological and soteriological finality based on his idiosyncratic reading of Gotama. Third, Sarkar made repeated claims that Buddhist and Hindu tantra share identical features and goals, and that it was artificial and false to distinguish them from each other. If this is indeed the case (a question that goes beyond the scope of this paper), and if it is possible to trace the tantric teachings of Buddhism back to an origin in Gotama himself, it would then be instructive to examine how Gotama's essential teachings

fit in with a tantric perspective such as that advocated by Sarkar. In other words, can we see tantric elements in Gotama's core teachings, and conversely Buddhist elements in Sarkar's tantra? A fourth, and less crucial issue is the question whether the four noble truths can be reformulated in metaphysically and experientially positive terms, moving away from the discourse on cyclical suffering and pain and towards an articulation of cosmic purpose and happiness. If so, how would such a "positive" discourse contribute to the way we structure our personal and collective lives? It is these questions and issues that the present paper addresses.

In this paper, I explore the apparent divergences, notwithstanding a deeper and less obvious convergence, between the worldviews of these two spiritual teachers. We will first take a brief excursion through Sarkar's life and times, followed by a more detailed discussion of his concept of *ananda* juxtaposed against Gotama Buddha's notion of *dukkha*. Attention will be placed on how each of these teachers sees the origin and destination of the world, and the meaning and purpose of individual and collective existence. We will then probe into the soteriological praxis that each of them has proposed for the attainment of ultimate freedom and happiness. I will conclude by comparing cursorily how each teacher's soteriological framework can be shaped into a broader social philosophy that has transformative value for human society. (As all of Sarkar's spiritual writings are authored under his alternative name "Anandamurti", the names "Sarkar" and "Anandamurti" will be used interchangeably throughout this paper, with "Anandamurti" being used exclusively for all quotes of his spiritual teachings for ease of referencing.)

Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar – His Life and Times

Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1921-1990), founder-preceptor of the global socio-spiritual movement that is Ananda Marga, grew up in a family steeped in ancient spiritual

traditions and regional leadership, spending much of his school vacations in his family's ancestral home in Burdwan, West Bengal.⁵ He underwent his higher education in Vidyasagar College in Calcutta. Sarkar's early years were reportedly surrounded by miraculous events including mystical experiences, parapsychological events such as precognition, and near escapes from death. He survived several assassination attempts to become a well-known spiritual teacher in India by the 1950's. In 1955, following his founding of AM in Jamalpur, he became known to his followers as Sri Sri Anandamurti or Baba, respectively rendered by AM as "he who attracts others as an embodiment of bliss" and "beloved father".

Sarkar was a prolific writer and teacher, who not only concerned himself with spirituality but also gave extensive teachings on social philosophy. He created a new political-economic theory and social movement called the Progressive Utilization Theory (abbreviated as PROUT), which was meant to represent an alternative "third force" to the dominant ideologies of capitalism and communism. AM and PROUT grew rapidly in the 1960's and drew fierce opposition from many Hindu groups and the communists in India.⁶ This was due, in part to Sarkar's public rejection of the caste system, his outward disregard for the plethora of Hindu rituals, and his criticism of orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, and in part to his iconoclastic stance toward both capitalism and communism. By the late 1960's, Ananda Margis were holding key positions in the Indian civil service. The Indian government came to regard AM as a politically subversive organization, and civil servants were thenceforth banned from joining the movement.

The 1970's saw even greater trials for Sarkar and his followers, including a 7-year imprisonment of Sarkar under false charges. It was not until the removal of Indira Gandhi's government that Sarkar's case could be appealed and the judgement reversed. Sarkar was released from prison on August 2, 1978, shortly after the Patna High Court overturned all charges against AM.⁷ AM, having been persistently persecuted from the

late sixties to the early eighties, experienced the culmination of its persecution in the brutal public murder of eighteen of its members on April 30, 1982, by communists in Calcutta.⁸

From his release until his death on October 21, 1990, Sarkar continued his spiritual and social activities in Calcutta, composing devotional songs, giving spiritual talks, and teaching meditation to many disciples, especially to his senior monks (Sanskrit: *avadhutas*) and nuns (*avadhutikas*). He gave lectures on linguistics, wrote children's literature, and managed his various organizations, which had greatly expanded by then. Since his death, AM has been led by a well-respected senior disciple of Sarkar, Acarya Sraddhananda Avadhuta, who has been its elected President until the present day.

Ananda or Dukkha? A Juxtaposition

Sarkar named his telling and most foundational discourse the *Ananda Sutram* or 'A Collection of Aphorisms of Bliss'. In the preface to *AS (Ananda Sutram)*, the editors claim that Anandamurti has "in a few vivid strokes presented humanity with original concepts of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and macrohistory" and has propounded for the first time "a socio-economic approach conceived in the light of a theistic philosophy, blending subjective approach with objective adjustment, that offers the world a well-knit and progressive social system based on economic justice".⁹ Sarkar's socio-economic theory will not be discussed here.

In chapter two of *AS*, Anandamurti concisely defines his concept of *ananda* as follows:¹⁰

- 2-1. A congenial mental feeling is called happiness.
- 2-2. The attachment to happiness is the primary *vrtti* (propensity) of living beings.
- 2-3. Infinite happiness is *ananda* (bliss).
- 2-4. This *ananda* is called *Brahma*.

Sarkar defines happiness as a congenial mental feeling, explaining it as a state of parallelism between the waves of incoming stimuli (both material and mental) and the individual's mental waves conditioned by his/her accumulated "reactive momenta" (*samskara*). "Reactive momenta" refers to the totality of potential reactions imprinted on every individual's mind consequent on any volitional act of thought, speech, and behaviour. Anandamurti further explains *ananda* in his auto-commentary to *AS* by emphasizing that each and every living being, not content with a little, seeks out that "endless happiness (that) is a condition beyond the precincts of weal and woe".¹¹ This seeking is an innate urge or propensity of every living being. He equates *ananda* with the singular, limitless, and "self-same blissful entity" called "*Brahma*", which is "the composite of *siva* and *sakti*".¹²

Siva (also termed *purusa* or *atman*) is the cognitive, witnessing aspect of the supreme blissful entity, while *sakti* is the operative, actional aspect. In other words, *brahma* exists as the ultimate witness to all that happens in the universe (being the supreme cognitive principle), while having the capacity to activate and direct the entire flow of creation (being simultaneously the supreme operative principle). It is the action of *sakti* on the "body" of *siva* that results in the transformation and gradual crudification of *siva* into first the "Cosmic Mind", and then the five fundamental factors that compose the entire inanimate order.¹³ This cosmic mind is formed in three stages, each of which can be regarded as a functional phase in a primordially objectless consciousness that is progressively being objectified. The first functional stage is *mahat-tattva*, the pure "I am" feeling. The second stage is *aham-tattva*, the active "I do" feeling, while the third stage is *citta-tattva*, the objectified "I have done" feeling. These stages reflect, on a macrocosmic scale, the phenomenology of the mind as it polarizes into subjective and objective poles during the cosmogonic process (*sancara*). On a microcosmic scale, these stages are replicated in individual minds but in a reverse direction - from *citta*, to *aham*, and finally

to *mahat* - during the evolutionary development of consciousness in matter (*pratisancara*). In other words, Sarkar sees mind on a microcosmic scale as an emergent phenomenon arising out of the evolving complexity and internal friction of matter. In this process, individual minds develop from the crudest, most objectified phase of *citta*, through a subtler phase of *aham*, and finally to the subtlest phase of *mahat*.

Going back a few steps to the point when elementary matter has just arisen out of the matrix of cosmic mind, life subsequently emerges from combination of the five fundamental factors in requisite proportions and the formation of a resultant nucleus within the inanimate body. This occurs in the context of an environment congenial to the development of life. Primitive life-forms then undergo the process of evolution driven by the three forces of (1) struggle of the organism with the physical environment (analogous to Darwinian natural selection); (2) struggle of the organism with ideas (intellectual and psychic clash with other organisms); and (3) attraction of the "Great" (the force of spiritual attraction emanated by cosmic consciousness). The culmination of evolution lies in the re-absorption of the individual bodymind into the unqualified, unconfined, blissful consciousness out of which it emerged.

Within the context of *ananda* and *brahma*, Sarkar also explains how suffering and stagnation arise and exist in life. The problems of life reside in the failure of the mind to realize its original and basic nature, as the Self that is pure, witnessing consciousness and bliss. The mind ignorantly pursues crude objects of gratification in the hope of finding permanent happiness, which however can only be found in realizing the Self. Incidentally, this search for happiness is inspired and propelled by none other than that very witnessing consciousness itself, though the search is somewhat misplaced in locus and misguided in means. This search for bliss in the wrong places and with improper means is due to the forces of extroversion (*avidya maya*) within the mind. *Avidya maya* is the centrifugal aspect of *sakti* that repels unit entities away from *brahma*, while *vidya*

maya, the centripetal force of *sakti*, does the opposite. There is an eternal dialectical dance between *vidya maya* and *avidya maya*, metaphorically termed the divine or cosmic play (*lila*). The force of concealment (*avarani sakti*), the first variant of *avidya maya*, causes the mind to forget its supreme source and hides it from its view. The force of distortion or repulsion (*viksepa sakti*), a second variant of *avidya maya* causes the mind to move away from its source, and manifests as the many degenerating propensities and ideas that disturb the mind's natural peace. As a result of these twin variant forces of *avidya maya*, the mind seeks for, but fails to find, bliss in physical and/or mental objects, and experiences *dukkha* instead. More insidiously, the mind is prevented from progressing on the path of evolution towards its ultimate potential and stagnates, or in some cases even regresses. However, while Sarkar fully recognizes suffering as a fact of existence, it is essential to emphasize that he does not see it as an ultimate truth. Suffering has only the status of a relative truth, since it exists only when experienced by the mind. What is within the orbit of the mind is, for Sarkar, constantly changing and not the ultimate reality that is changeless and timeless.

Hence, the origin of life and the world, and of the living search for and experience of *ananda*, ultimately rests in the blissful, supreme *brahma*. From the Sarkarian perspective, the truth of *ananda*, the world, and life, and the corresponding truth of their origin, can be likened to the first and second of Gotama's Four Noble Truths. Embedded within these truths is Sarkar's explanation of the origin of suffering in the world. Let us now compare Sarkar with Gotama in terms of the first and second Noble Truths.

Gotama, the historical Buddha, summed up his teachings with the systematic and pithy axioms of the Four Noble Truths (Pali: *cattari ariya-saccani*). These state the reality of: (1) *dukkha* or "unsatisfactoriness" in life and experience; (2) the origin of *dukkha* (*dukkha-samudaya*), which is *tanha-avijja* or "craving bound up in ignorance"; (3) the cessation of *dukkha* (*dukkha-nirodha*), which is *nibbana* or final deliverance from

suffering; and (4) the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* (Pali: *dukkha-nirodha-gamini-patipada*), namely the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya atthangika magga*). Gotama explains the first Noble Truth thus:¹⁴

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress are suffering. Being attached to the unloved is suffering, being separated from the loved is suffering, not getting what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering.

The "five aggregates of grasping" are the five component processes that make up a human being, namely: the aggregate of form or materiality (*rupa*), the aggregate of feeling (*vedana*), the aggregate of perception (*sanna*), the aggregate of mental formations (*sankhara*), and the aggregate of consciousness (*vinnana*). Gotama continues to outline the origin and cause of this suffering in terms of craving manifested in three different forms:¹⁵

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering? It is that craving which gives rise to rebirth, bound up with pleasure and lust, finding fresh delight now here, now there: that is to say sensual craving, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

It is evident that for Gotama, craving by the psychophysical organism is what drives the whole process of rebirth and its natural corollary of suffering, both physical and psychological. In a sense, the arising of the entire life-world of the individual living being is a direct result of craving, and when once arisen, this individual life-world is marked with suffering, again due to the force of craving. This is more fully stated in another piece of Buddhist doctrine that occupies a central place in the overall Buddhist doctrinal structure, namely that of Conditioned Arising (Pali: *paticca-samuppada*). The standard version of *PS* (*paticca-samuppada*) is given in terms of a series of twelve links as follows:¹⁶

- Conditioned by ignorance (*avijja-paccaya*) are activities (*sankhara*).
- Conditioned by activities is consciousness (*vinnana*).
- Conditioned by consciousness is name-and-form (*nama-rupa*).
- Conditioned by name-and-form is the sixfold sense-base (*salayatana*).

- Conditioned by the sixfold sense-base is contact (*phassa*).
 - Conditioned by contact is feeling (*vedana*).
 - Conditioned by feeling is craving (*tanha*).
 - Conditioned by craving is clinging (*upadana*).
 - Conditioned by clinging is becoming (*bhava*).
 - Conditioned by becoming is birth (*jati*).
 - Conditioned by birth are aging-and-death (*jara-marana*), grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair.
- Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering.

It can be argued that the *PS* formula, which "purports to explain the origin of suffering (*dukkha*)" is in effect "an elaboration of the second Noble Truth, tracing the chain of causal dependence back beyond craving (*tanha*) to its ultimate origin in ignorance (*avijja*)".¹⁷ This individual life-world and its arising, as elaborated in *PS*, can be interpreted in a dual sense: microcosmic and psychological, and/or macrocosmic and physical.¹⁸ *PS*, and by extension, the second Noble Truth, can thus be seen as purely mental phenomena on an individual level (a *dukkha*-eliciting cognitive, volitional and emotional process that temporally arises and dissolves) and/or a cosmic physical process of life-world origination in space and time, expressed in the cycle of rebirths.

Gotama's doctrine of the five aggregates and his twelve links of Conditioned Arising point to a fluid, process view of the human psychophysical complex. In this dynamic psychophysical process of sensations, perceptions, impulses, emotions, and thoughts, there is no permanent, substantial entity that can be identified as the "self" of the person. In Gotama's view, this so-called "self" simply cannot be found in the flux of our mental and physical universe. In contrast, Sarkar takes the view that a "Self" indeed exists, but not in the way we think it does. Appropriating the term "*atman*" (which is equated with *brahma*) from the *Upanisadic* tradition, Sarkar defines the "Self" as an unbroken flow of cognition that permeates and is intrinsically one with as well as beyond the universe. Like Gotama, Sarkar does not see the existence of a permanent, substantial "self" in the psychophysical being; but unlike Gotama, he locates the "self" in a cosmic flow of awareness that has the potential to metamorphose itself into seemingly concrete

and mistakenly lasting entities. For Sarkar, the universe is constantly changing and metamorphosing, and the "self" is no more a "thing" than it is for Gotama. However, unlike Gotama who deconstructs the "self" entirely, Sarkar acknowledges an infinite, non-substantial awareness as the basis of all our constructions of "self". The *citta*, *aham*, and *mahat* are mere functional expressions in the phenomenology of the "self", which though real and solid as they appear to one caught in illusion (*maya*), are nevertheless empty of ultimate existence. *Citta*, *aham*, and *mahat* exist as crudified contractions of a vast, unconfined space of clarity, knowing, and bliss, and can be viewed as constructive, reifying processes of the mind similar in function to the five aggregates or the twelve links of Gotama.

To sum up, whereas for Sarkar, life is characterized by the personal search for bliss or *ananda*, in all its forms, variations, and degrees of subtlety, for Gotama, life is characterized by suffering or *dukkha* in its various forms and expressions. For Sarkar, the source of bliss and the search for it lies in the infinite, blissful entity he calls *brahma*. The cosmos and its inhabitants (and their innate urge for bliss) result from a dynamic and ongoing metamorphosis of that singular entity into its many and varied forms. Within individual minds, suffering arises as a result of the misplaced search for bliss based on the operation of *avidya maya* or extroversial force. For Gotama, the origin of this whole mass of suffering lies in individual ignorance and craving, with the mechanics of its arising formulated in the Conditioned Arising doctrine. Perhaps the most important difference between the two thinkers is that while Sarkar postulates an ultimate first cause for the entire macrocosmic and microcosmic order, Gotama does not. Gotama focuses on the nature and origin of every individual's suffering, and states that ignorance and craving, beginningless and primordial, are the twin causes of this suffering. These two forces are also the cause of the repeated physical rebirths of the individual. So, Sarkar can be described as fundamentally cosmotheistic while Gotama is either agnostic or atheistic. In

the Abhidhamma literature of later Buddhism, an attempt is made to account for the origination of the universe by appealing to the notion of collective *karma*. It is the collective craving-ignorance in myriad individual minds that drives the cosmogonic process.¹⁹ However, the ultimate origin of these minds and the primary elements that comprise the raw material for cosmogenesis remains unaccounted for.

It is possible from Sarkar's perspective to critique the Buddhist position on life and suffering as being overly pessimistic. It can be argued that undue emphasis on life's natural difficulties is reactive rather than proactive, and that such a view portrays spirituality as mere escape from authentic and courageous living. However, it is unlikely that such an argument would go unchallenged. First, the Buddha has often been depicted in the Pali texts as having great warmth and compassion for all, showing acts of love and affirmative joy on numerous occasions.²⁰ In one classic example, he was portrayed to have sat and mediated between two angry factions that were on the brink of war without the slightest hint of fear or hesitation.²¹ It can be argued that such an attitude and behaviour are hardly consistent with a fatalistic and reactive approach to life. Secondly, there are numerous textual accounts attributed to the Buddha extolling the happiness that come from hard work and right living, the basic purity of the mind, and the highest happiness of *nibbanic* freedom.²² These accounts do not suggest pessimism but rather a joyful and realistic celebration of life and its ultimate potential. Thirdly, it can be counter-argued that the Four Noble Truths are neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic, offering as they do, an unadorned clear-headed assessment of life's problems and opportunities. The Four Noble Truths are comparable to a medical doctor's assessment, where the first and second truths can be likened to the medical identification of a specific disease state and its corresponding pathology, while the third and fourth truths can be likened to the possibility of curing the disease and its corresponding treatment. Seen in this light, Gotama's framework of the Four Noble Truths can be interpreted as a pedagogy

of human liberation, with the Buddha as physician and his teachings as therapy or cure for the inevitable "sicknesses" of life.

To conclude the comparison, Sarkar's and Gotama's views on the arising of suffering bear certain similarities. Sarkar's twin forces of *avidya maya* and Gotama's *avijja-tanha* seem to correlate loosely in form and function, one pointing to a veiling of some fundamental soteriological truth, and the other describing an active propulsion towards things (sensory and mental pleasures) that do not finally satisfy but bring suffering instead. But while Gotama takes suffering as the starting point of his entire soteriology, Sarkar relativizes and contextualizes suffering within his discourse on *ananda* and its origin in *brahma*. For Sarkar, bliss is more fundamental than suffering.

The Goal and Path: Bliss or Cessation?

The third Noble Truth purports to explain the possibility of suffering's end through the relinquishing of craving for sensual pleasure, existence, and non-existence.²³

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering? It is the complete fading-away and extinction of this craving, its forsaking and abandonment, liberation from it, detachment from it.

Gotama describes the cessation of suffering in a negative formulation that entails the total extinction of craving, the cause of suffering. In terms of PS, this means the elimination of ignorance, which then automatically results in the cessation of craving and of the entire chain of causation leading to suffering. This cessation of suffering is equated with *nibbana*, an ineffable state which is complete freedom from all craving and *dukkha*. *Nibbana* is often depicted as "without support, non-functioning, objectless" (Pali: *appatittham, appavattam, anarammanam*).²⁴ In positive terms, Gotama's *nibbana* is "the highest bliss" (*nibbanam paramam sukham*)²⁵ and is "discernment, non-manifestive, infinite, shining in every respect" (*vinnanam anidassanam anantam sabbato-pabham*).²⁶ *Nibbana* is the final goal of life and the culmination of Buddhist spiritual practice.

Realizing the cessation of *dukkha* that is *nibbana* also signifies the end of all future rebirths. How this goal is achieved is stated in the fourth Noble Truth:²⁷

And what, monks, is the Noble Truth of the Way of Practice Leading to the Cessation of Suffering? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path, namely:- Right View, Right Thought; Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood; Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

The Noble Eightfold Path is traditionally divided into the three trainings of morality (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*). This path is entirely a matter of individual effort, relying on nothing other than the teachings and practices laid down by Gotama, implemented within the context of a community of like-minded practitioners (the *Sangha*).

Sarkar's counterpart for the third Noble Truth is expressed in terms of liberation (Sanskrit: *mukti*) and salvation (*moksa*). Anandamurti succinctly explains this twin aspect of the final goal in chapters one and two of *Ananda Sutram*:²⁸

- 1-21. When the *aham*²⁹ and the *citta*³⁰ merge into the Macrocosmic *Mahat*³¹, the merger is called *sagunasthiti* or *savikalpa samadhi*.
- 1-22. When the *mahat* merges into the *Atman*, it is called *nirgunasthiti* (state of objectlessness) or *nirvikalpa samadhi*.
- 1-23. This state (of *nirvikalpa samadhi*) is beyond the mind.
- 2-5. That (*Brahma*) having been attained, all thirst is permanently quenched.

Anandamurti states that the ultimate goal of life and spiritual praxis lies not in the cessation of *dukkha* per se, but in the attainment of "this most exalted state of God-realization, *Brahmasadbhava*".³² Such an attainment naturally brings with it the total dissolution of all thirst, bondage, and suffering. This attainment has two variant forms: liberation (*mukti*), defined as merger into qualified supreme consciousness (*saguna brahma*); and salvation (*moksa*), defined as merger into non-qualified supreme consciousness (*nirguna brahma*). Liberation is the permanent realization of *savikalpa samadhi* (a state of attributional absorption) while salvation is the permanent realization

of *nirvikalpa samadhi* (a state of non-attributional absorption).³³ Anandamurti gives us a glimpse into these two states:³⁴

If, through *sadhana* [spiritual practices], people can merge their unit minds with the Cosmic Mind of *Parama Purusa* [Supreme Consciousness], then the unit minds themselves become the Cosmic Mind; their individual identities are merged in that Cosmic "I". In that condition, there remains nothing outside. Thus, there is no longer any possibility of physical or psychic clash with any external entity or object. All objects, all ideas, arise out of one's mind. This is the state of liberation - a state of cosmic bliss far above the domain of mundane pleasures and pains ...
... The unit consciousness is the witness of the unit mind, but we do not call the unit consciousness the Supreme Cognition, because this unit consciousness is simply a reflection of the Supreme Cognition on the unit mind. When spiritual aspirants totally surrender their all to the Supreme, they merge their unit consciousness into the Cosmic Consciousness ... That mental state, devoid of *samkalpa* and *vikalpa*,³⁵ is the state of *moksa* [salvation].

Anandamurti depicts the nature of cosmic consciousness in terms of unsurpassed luminosity, whereby "His effulgence outshines even the sun's radiance".³⁶ He goes on to say, on the same page, that:

The sun is not *vyotisvarupa* (characteristically self-effulgent), it is He alone Who is *vyotisvarupa*. In His radiance there is depth but no severity, there is sweetness but no harshness. Observe His calm brilliance in the firmament of your heart ...

Anandamurti again emphasises the clarity of the supreme consciousness by saying that, "in every created entity there exists the existential-I feeling and the ever-wakeful presence of that Supreme Effulgent Entity".³⁷ Hence, a merger into cosmic consciousness - the infinite witnessing faculty - would mean abiding in a state of unequalled illumination and wakeful presence.³⁸

While the two variant forms of God-realization, *mukti* and *moksa*, are most commonly mentioned, there is another state of attainment that appears to be possible for the spiritual aspirant. Sarkar's description of this "third" state differs from those that he gave to *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa samadhi* quoted above, suggesting an experience of "living" or "embodied liberation" rather than a temporary state of absorption:³⁹

When one is ensconced in the exalted state due to the grace of *Guru*, what stage does one's intuition reach? What sort of realization does one attain? One discovers the divine play of the Infinite Entity in each and every finite manifestation. One realises that the Infinite Entity, who is ever present in His vast cosmic stance, is also ever present in every molecule and atom. One experiences that the entire universe is vibrated and invigorated with His unending cosmic flow. Every entity of this universe, big and small, every minute expression of pain and pleasure of the numerous microcosms, lie within His vast ocean of cosmic bliss ... One realizes that the Supreme Cognitive Faculty resides in His immutable form while simultaneously undertaking His tumultuous macrocosmic creation, and is thus the supreme desideratum of every finite entity ...

... Behind this playful stance of the Cosmic Entity lies His eternal immutable stance, which is a passive witness to the everchanging forms of His macropsychic manifestation. When devotees see His mutable forms with genuine spiritual vision they realize that they are already ensconced in His immutable stance. This is the state of supreme realization. In this state the miseries caused by the binding fetters vanish and the *sadhakas* become illuminated by the sweet touch of the playful, blissful, immutable *Parama Purusa*. This is the supreme spiritual fulfilment.

The above passage suggests that the "state of supreme realization" and "supreme spiritual fulfilment" consists in being fully immersed in a passive pristine awareness of infinite scope while simultaneously embracing every changing object, every molecule and atom, every living being, and every experience of individual pain and pleasure as vibrative, "playful", and "blissful" expressions of that very same awareness. Sarkar did not give a formal term to designate this ultimate state, a state that appears to contain elements of both *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa samadhi*. It is *savikalpa* in the sense that mental objects - thoughts or things - are present within the field of awareness. It is *nirvikalpa* in the sense that the meditator has dissolved into the "immutable", "passive" witnessing stance of supreme cognizance. Could this supreme state then be that of *sabija nirvikalpa samadhi*, with which Gotama's *sa-upadi-sesa nibbana* can be compared? Could this state be the living experience of a fully realized person who has attained *nirvikalpa samadhi* but who has remaining *samskaras* yet to be exhausted through embodied existence? These complex technical issues remain to be investigated and are best left undiscussed for now.

Comparing Sarkar and Gotama on the third Noble Truth, we find that Sarkar takes a *via positiva* while Gotama takes a *via negativa* approach in pointing to an experience that essentially defies linguistic conventions. Both see the final goal, the supreme fulfilment of spiritual praxis, as the cessation of all forms of suffering. While for Sarkar this cessation takes place as a corollary of *brahma* attainment, for Gotama the cessation of suffering is itself the focus and goal; it is *nibbana* itself. A preliminary comparison of Sarkar's *nirvikalpa samadhi* and Gotama's *nibbana* shows a striking similarity in phenomenological features. Both teachers portray this highest state as objectless, non-manifestive, infinite, all-radiant, and of the nature of the highest bliss.⁴⁰

Another similarity lies in the recognition that two forms of *nibbana* or *samadhi* are possible for a spiritual aspirant. Gotama distinguishes *nibbana* "with remainder of *upadi* (*sa-upadi-sesa*)" from *nibbana* "without remainder of *upadi* (*an-upadi-sesa*)":⁴¹

In him, the five sense-faculties still remain, through which, as they have not departed, he undergoes the pleasant and the unpleasant, he experiences happiness and suffering. In him, that which is the destruction of attachment, hatred, and delusion, this is called, monks, the element of *nibbana* with remainder of *upadi* ... Here itself, monks, all that is experienced, with no delight for him, will become cool; this is called monks, the element of *nibbana* without remainder of *upadi*.

With regard to *an-upadi-sesa nibbana*, Harvey argues that other passages of parallel wording support the view that this "remainder-less" *nibbana* is synonymous with the state of *nibbana* after death. The following passage seems to corroborate this claim: "Between the night in which the Tathagata gains supreme enlightenment, Cunda, and the night in which he attains the *nibbana*-element without remainder, whatever he proclaims, says or explains is so and not otherwise".⁴² From this it appears that the first (*sa-upadi-sesa*) is the state of one who has attained *nibbana* but is still living in a physical body with mind intact, and is thus experiencing the results of past craving (though all craving has ceased from the moment of *nibbana* realization). The second (*an-upadi-sesa*) is the state of a *nibbana*-realized being who has completely exhausted his store of *karmic* reactions

and left the physical body. Masefield has cast doubt on this long-accepted understanding of the distinction between *sa-upadisesa* and *an-upadisesa nibbana* as referring to the pre- and post-mortem states respectively.⁴³ Nevertheless, the distinction itself is clearly recognized in the early texts. This distinction invites comparison with the distinction between *sabija* (with seed) and *nirbija* (without seed) *samadhi*, recognized by Sarkar. In *sabija samadhi*, the mind attains the highest *nirvikalpa* state with "seeds" of potential reactions to previous actions still unexhausted. In this case, the person returns from that state in order to experience and exhaust potential reactions. When all reactions have been destroyed, he/she merges totally and permanently into that infinite peace - *nirbija nirvikalpa samadhi* - which is final *moksa*. In respect of these teachings, the convergence of ideas between Sarkar and Gotama is striking.

Sarkar's equivalent for the fourth Noble Truth is in essence his "Path to Bliss" (Ananda Marga), which integrates the three systems of Saiva Tantra, Sakta Tantra, and Vaisnava Tantra,⁴⁴ and the traditional yogic paths of knowledge (*jnana*), action (*karma*), and devotion (*bhakti*). The spiritual practice (*sadhana*) of Ananda Marga is set in the traditional framework of the eight-limbed yoga (*astanga yoga*), though not without some modifications in interpretation by Sarkar. Sarkar defines *jnana yoga* as the path of self-understanding or self-knowledge, which is to know the Cognitive Faculty (*siva/atman/purusa*) by merging into it. This can be equated with the Saiva Tantra approach, which emphasises the faculty of non-dual knowledge and the elimination of all social and caste distinctions. Anandamurti describes self-knowledge as "becoming one with the ocean [of consciousness] while trying to fathom it",⁴⁵ and states that by "attaining self-knowledge through *paravidya* [subjective knowledge]", human beings can "move towards their final destination".⁴⁶ He also says:⁴⁷

The "I" of "I know" - "I know that I exist" - that "I" of "I know" is the essence of spirituality...When you know your self, that stage, that stance, is

the supreme stance. And for that realization, to know your own "I", is your *sadhana*, is your spiritual practice.

As Anandamurti says, the approach of Sakta Tantra emphasises the "attainment of [spiritual] power and its judicious application".⁴⁸ It stresses the development of human vigour and fearlessness, requiring a sense of selfless surrender of personal weaknesses to the Supreme. This blends well with *karma yoga*, which Anandamurti describes as selfless action performed with the attitudes of (1) "relinquishing the desire for the fruits of action"; (2) "abandoning the vanity of performing an act"; and (3) "surrendering all actions unto *Brahma*".⁴⁹ The net effect of such *karma yoga* is to exhaust all previous reactive momenta and to prevent any accumulation of new ones.

Anandamurti comments that "Vaisnava Tantra aspires to lead humanity towards *Parama Purusa* [supreme consciousness] through the cult of sweet, divine bliss."⁵⁰ From this comment, it appears that Vaisnava Tantra is synonymous with *bhakti yoga*. Anandamurti identifies *bhakti* as the greatest treasure of the human heart, with all spiritual practices culminating in the non-dual state of *kevala bhakti* or "complete non-attributional devotion".⁵¹ He then equates non-attributional devotion with the ultimate self-knowledge that leads one to salvation.⁵²

... *self-knowledge* is the path of attaining salvation ... It has also been said that only by moving towards the Supreme One, leaving all other entities, and totally surrendering oneself with all the sweetness of life emanating from the deepest recesses of the heart into the infinite sweetness of *Paramasiva* – only in this way can one attain the supreme benevolence – and then only can one attain *self-knowledge*. What could be a deeper and sweeter interpretation of devotion than this?

From the above it can be seen that Sarkar identifies devotion as the pre-eminent spiritual practice, characterised by selfless surrendering of all one's being to the highest consciousness, here termed *Paramasiva*. The process of surrendering is said to be full of sweetness and to be experienced by the devotee as a blissful flow, where inner and outer reality is transformed into a world of blissful ideation and an unbroken divine play.⁵³

The eight-limbed yoga, originally attributed to Patanjali, comprises the principles of social balance (*yama*), personal integration (*niyama*), yoga postures (*asana*), vital-energy regulation (*pranayama*), withdrawal of mind (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), flow of mind (*dhyana*), and meditative absorption (*śamadhi*). These same steps are taught by Sarkar in his system of six meditative lessons and the practice of *kirtana*,⁵⁴ which simultaneously utilise and develop the faculties of *jnana*, *karma*, and *bhakti*.⁵⁵

An important difference between Sarkar and Gotama relates to the need for a spiritual preceptor or *guru*. Gotama exhorts his followers to "live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma [teaching] as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge."⁵⁶ Anandamurti instead urges that while one has to make continuous effort to "long for and run after the Great",⁵⁷ the final attainment requires the elevating force and saving grace of the *guru*. The *guru* is ultimately an aspect of *brahma* himself, his liberating and interfacing aspect termed *taraka brahma*, which is the link between the manifested (*śaguna*) and unmanifested (*nirguna*) *brahma*. The *guru* acts in the world as a realized master to lead beings toward liberation and salvation.

As regards the fourth Noble Truth, both teachers prescribe a path of practice having an eightfold structure and a subdivision into three categories of praxis. For Gotama, the ultimate praxis for *nibbana* attainment is *panna*, a direct cognitive insight into the nature of suffering, its cause, its end, and the way to its end. This ultimate insight comes about through radical letting go of all mental constructs and physical objects and may thus be phenomenologically similar in some respects to the experience of total surrender. For Sarkar, the ultimate praxis is *bhakti*, a complete surrendering of the self to the cosmic entity that is simultaneously a state of total, non-dual self-knowledge where the knower, the knowing, and the known are One. Anandamurti comments on the

Buddhist *summum bonum* by saying that it is essentially "*jnana nirvana*", and is to be attained by means of the path of knowledge.⁵⁸ For Sarkar, *bhakti* supersedes *jnana* - or rather, *bhakti* is *jnana par excellence*.

Concluding Comparisons

In this dialogue between the two masters, a refreshing collage has emerged in which identical yet shifting patterns can be seen. Gotama and Sarkar, each in his own era and in his unique way, have each articulated a body of soteriological theory and praxis that is unmistakably Indian. Both are concerned with the nature of life, its origin, its goal, and the way to this goal. They are identical in their pre-occupation with attaining ultimate happiness, but they start this search from opposite angles of vision - Gotama from *dukkha*, Sarkar from *ananda*. It is debatable whether the spiritual paths they advocate are to be seen as leading to the same destination, an issue that would require a deeper and more thorough comparative analysis. Also, a more rigorous comparison of their respective sets of spiritual practices is better left to another work. It can be argued here that Sarkar's perspective, based on the idea of non-duality of the Divine and the world, lends itself more readily to a proactive engagement with the world than does Gotama's. Bussey argues that "Tantra, which is situated in a resurgent indigenous consciousness, is both ancient and modern, possessing as it does the deep wisdoms of this episteme while being energized with a liberatory ethic aimed at physical, social and spiritual emancipation from exploitative ideologies."⁵⁹ Many followers of Ananda Marga (AM) would maintain that the spiritual philosophy of Sarkar, expressed as it is in the discourse of bliss and cosmic creative consciousness, has the potential to serve as a vibrantly dynamic framework for life and spirituality in the postmodern world. They would claim that its optimistic and affirming approach to personal transformation, with its attendant liberation from limitations and suffering, frees up immense energy to move fearlessly and joyously

towards AM's ultimate goal. Arguably, Sarkar's spiritual worldview is amenable to being shaped into a broader social and political ideology having emancipatory value for the human collective, as has been done in his Progressive Utilization Theory.⁶⁰

This suggestion in no way negates the many positive attempts made by Buddhists, both in the past and in the present, to create new expressions of doctrine and action that have been highly affirmative yet doctrinally authentic. Examples that come to mind are the Mahayana *bodhisattva* ideal,⁶¹ the Vajrayana concepts of "clear-light mind" and "intrinsic awareness",⁶² and the contemporary movement of socially-engaged Buddhism.⁶³ It is possible, from the Buddhist perspective, to argue that the Buddha's teachings contain hitherto untapped potential for bringing emancipation and happiness to society at large, and that the recent rise in socially-engaged Buddhism represents the beginnings of a significant Buddhist contribution to the wave of global transformation in the years ahead. In this sense, Sarkar and Gotama, if they were alive today, might find themselves partners in the common, ongoing quest for personal and collective liberation.

NOTES

Abbreviations are used in the Text and Notes as follows:

- AN* *Anguttara Nikaya* (Pali Text Society edition)
AS *Ananda Sutram* of Anandamurti
PS *Paticca-samuppada*
SN *Samyutta Nikaya* (Pali Text Society edition)

- 1 - This paper was presented at the Australian Association for the Study of Religions Annual Conference in June 2000, Brisbane, Australia.
- 2 - A term first coined by Aristotle but used later by Foucault in a different sense to mean 'anonymous, historically emergent structures of thought, which set conditions and boundaries for what can be thought or said within a certain social and intellectual setting.' (Quoted from Mautner 1997, p. 174). The notion of episteme as applied to Tantra is taken from Bussey 1998, pp. 705-716.

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- 3 - Unauthored 1991, pp.10-11.
 - 4 - *Brahma* here is akin to the more familiar and gender-neutral concept of *Brahman*.
 - 5 - Inayatullah 1999, p. 1; and Dharmavedananda 1995, p. 425.
 - 6 - Inayatullah 1999, p. 1.
 - 7 - Krpananda 1990, p. 125.
 - 8 - Sil 1988, p. 1.
 - 9 - Anandamurti 1996, p. xi.
 - 10 - Anandamurti 1996, pp. 18-19.
 - 11 - Anandamurti 1996, p. 19.
 - 12 - Ibid.
 - 13 - The five are the ethereal (*vyoma*), aerial (*marut*), luminous (*tejas*), liquid (*ap*), and solid (*ksiti*) factors (*tattva*).
 - 14 - Walshe 1987, p. 344.
 - 15 - Walshe 1987, p. 346.
 - 16 - Bucknell 1999, pp. 311-312.
 - 17 - Bucknell (1999: 312, footnote) bases this equation of the *PS* formula with the second Noble Truth on *AN* 1: 177.5-14.
 - 18 - On this dual interpretation of *PS*, see Bucknell 1999, pp. 327-328, note 46.
 - 19 - On the Abhidhammic conception of the origin and evolution of the physical universe and life, see Ranasinghe 1957, pp. 183-255).
 - 20 - See e.g. *SN* 3: 106 in Bodhi 2000, pp. 929-931; also Dhammika 1989, pp. 179-180.
 - 21 - Dhammika 1989, p. 155-157.
 - 22 - See e.g. Dhammika 1989, p. 9, p. 36, p. 46, and p. 147.
 - 23 - Walshe 1987, p. 347.
 - 24 - Harvey 1995, p. 203.
 - 25 - Buddharakkhita 1986, p. 80.
 - 26 - Harvey 1995, p. 199.

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- 27 - Walshe 1987, p. 348.
- 28 - Anandamurti 1996, pp. 14-15, also p. 19.
- 29 - *Aham* is the sense of 'I do', a portion of the objectivated mind more subtle than *citta* but cruder than *mahat*. All three - *citta*, *aham* and *mahat* - exist on both microcosmic and macrocosmic levels.
- 30 - *Citta* is the sense of 'I have done', the crudest portion of the objectivated mind. It is the unit or cosmic mental plate.
- 31 - *Mahat* is the pure existential 'I' or sense of 'I am', the subtlest portion of the mind (also called the subjectivated mind).
- 32 - Anandamurti 1995, p. 208.
- 33 - Sarkar's notions of *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa samadhi* do not entirely match the classical yoga notions denoted by these terms. Deeper discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 34 - Anandamurti 1995, p. 224.
- 35 - *Samkalpa* is the 'tendency of the mind to flow extroversively and associate with material objects'; *Vikalpa* is the 'tendency of the mind to withdraw and flow introversively' (see Anandamurti 1995, p. 303; also p. 305).
- 36 - Anandamurti 1988, p. 370.
- 37 - Anandamurti 1988, p. 435.
- 38 - Sarkar's notion of wakeful luminosity of the ultimate state resembles the Tibetan Buddhist notion of *rigpa*, frequently mentioned in the Dzogchen tradition. See Norbu 1990, pp. 72-75 and Sogyal 1992, pp. 150-169.
- 39 - Anandamurti 1988, pp. 482-483.
- 40 - More thorough and critical discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 41 - Harvey 1995, pp. 180-181.
- 42 - Walshe, 1987, p. 436.
- 43 - See Masfield 1979.
- 44 - Sarkar mentions two other systems of Tantra, namely Saura and Ganapatya Tantra, which are more concerned with medicine and astronomy, and social leadership and unity respectively than with spiritual practice. He has revised elements from these two systems and blended them into his social philosophy.
- 45 - Anandamurti 1995, p. 172.

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- 46 - Anandamurti 1995, p. 175.
- 47 - Anandamurti 1997, p. 77.
- 48 - Anandamurti 1994, p. 217.
- 49 - Anandamurti 1992, pp. 28-32.
- 50 - Anandamurti 1994, p. 217.
- 51 - Anandamurti 1994, pp. 73-74.
- 52 - Anandamurti 1995, p. 241.
- 53 - On devotion and surrender to God, see Anandamurti 1981, pp. 13-57; also pp. 179-251.
- 54 - In Ananda Marga, *kirtana* consists in chanting and dancing to the mantra "*Baba Nam Kevalam*".
- 55 - The six lessons of *Sahaja Yoga* or "yoga of natural spontaneity" form the basic system of meditative training in Ananda Marga. They are outlined in Unauthored 1991, pp. 55-58.
- 56 - Walshe 1987, p. 245.
- 57 - Anandamurti 1996, p. 19.
- 58 - Anandamurti 1995, p. 268.
- 59 - Bussey 1998, p. 705.
- 60 - For Progressive Utilization Theory, see Sarkar 1992.
- 61 - On the *bodhisattva* ideal, see Dayal 1932, Sangharakshita 1993, pp. 431-493; also Santideva 1971.
- 62 - On "clear light mind" and "intrinsic awareness", see respectively Gyatso 1995, pp. 94-96; also pp. 126-129; and Rabjam 1996, pp. 330-349.
- 63 - Two of the best-known exemplars of contemporary socially-engaged Buddhism are Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Master, and Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. See Thich 1993 and Gyatso 2000.

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