

[Dharmic Differences](#)

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INSIGHT

Dharmic Differences

Buddhism sprung from the Hindu heart and heartland, then pioneered its own distinct vision. Now, 2,500 years later, how similar is Buddha's Way?

Asia's two spiritual titans, Hinduism and Buddhism, have exerted profound influence on the planet and its people since their beginnings. They are unique in offering imperative moral direction alongside esoteric knowledge of the yogas leading to transcendent states of consciousness and ultimately to Liberation. Taken together, Buddhist and Hindu adherents and enthusiasts would roughly account for one-quarter of the entire world population. Both religions have spread from the same soil, India, to countries far and wide. Buddhism especially has settled abroad, while its once powerful presence in India has dwindled to fewer than five million adherents (.5 percent of the population). Despite significant similarities and lasting philosophical affinities, profound and undeniable differences remain between them, differences that sincere seekers of either tradition must eventually cognize, understand and resolve to agree or disagree with, thus essentially choosing one religion or the other. This feature is in three parts. First, New Delhi's doyan of Dharma, Ram Swarup, offers a thought-provoking overview of Hindu-Buddhist kinships and boldly proposes how the Buddha can be "explained" in a Hindu context. Second, New Mexico's

Vamadeva Shastri eloquently calls for a deeper understanding among Western seekers who cling to misconceptions about both of these great rivers of righteousness. Lastly, nine essential beliefs of both traditions are presented.

By Ram Swarup, New Delhi

Buddhism is returning home to India after a long exile of a thousand years. Religious tolerance of the average Hindu partly explains the warm reception. But a more important reason is the fact that Buddha and Buddhism form an intimate part of Hindu consciousness. Buddha was a Hindu, and Buddhism is Hindu in its origin and development, art and architecture, iconography, language, many of its beliefs, psychology, names, nomenclature, religious vows and spiritual disciplines. Hinduism is not all Buddhism, but Buddhism forms part of the ethos which is essentially Hindu.

Buddha's transcendence is the highlight and essence of his teachings and the justification of his claim to be a great world teacher and guide. Similarly, Buddha's compassion was not merely secular or even humanistic. Rather, it was a deep and loving concern of the "Enlightened One" for worldly creatures caught in the wheel of existence--birth, disease, decay, old age, death. The peace he taught was the Upanishadic "peace beyond understanding," not merely civic and political truce amongst men and nations. The joy he taught was the joy of emancipation from the web of repeated births.

To understand the relationship of Buddhism with Hinduism is to understand the deepest questions relating to spiritual theology as well as a whole gamut of yogic practices and spiritual disciplines. However, this relationship has been clouded, misunderstood and its intimacy minimized for two reasons. One reason is Buddha's silence over such fundamental questions as Brahman, God and soul, questions which occupy the center of interest in the Upanishadic literature. The other reason is Buddha's individual nuances and emphases. These nuances are not lacking in the Upanishads, but there they form only a part of a larger whole and therefore do not create the same one-sided impression of escapism and the painfulness of existence.

But was Buddha just an anomaly? Or was he a mighty representative, a leader of a well-authenticated spiritual tradition such as is so highly developed in the Upanishads and confirmed by great teachers and seers of ancient times? Thus posed, the question is not difficult to answer. His spiritual experience could not be random, arbitrary and personal. It must have been of a character universal and necessary, and there is reason to believe that his spiritual experience was wholly in the Vedantic tradition. Buddha's spiritual experience of enlightenment confirms and closely agrees with the Upanishadic teaching regarding the nature of the Ultimate Reality. He belonged to the Upanishadic heritage, and he cannot be understood in any other sense. The attempt to understand him in isolation, divorced from that tradition which he confirmed, enriched and represented, has only led to misunderstanding and distortion of his teachings. He himself claimed no originality, only to have "Seen an ancient way; followed an ancient road." What Buddha experienced was the vision celebrated in the Upanishads that the world of man

divorced from Godhead, the phenomenal world conceived independently of the transcendental principle, is nothing; it is an illusion, maya, an imposition, a house of cards, a castle of sand. But the nature of Buddhist Nothingness should not be misunderstood. In fact, there is nothing peculiarly Buddhist about this Nothingness. It is the process of self-noughting enjoined by all mystical religions and yogic disciplines. For going into spiritual regions above, it is necessary to pass through the doors of Nothingness. This is why an arhat has been defined as one in whom all outflows, all desires, all sense-life have ceased.

In Buddhism, as in Vedanta, self-abnegation was to precede transcendental experience. Not only in the self-noughting of the phenomenal but also in the characterization of the transcendental, Buddha follows the Upanishads. The nihilistic rendering by which Buddhism is known today is caused by his future followers like Nagasena, but there is nothing in the teachings of the Master himself to support this negativism. Nirvana was described as a state in which there is "neither old age, nor fear, nor disease, nor birth, nor death, nor anxiety." This is virtually the language of the Vedanta, the "That" of the Upanishads, declared to be imperishable, deathless, free, unborn, self-existent and formless by the Isa Upanishad. This is called Nirvana by Buddha and Brahman by Vedanta.

Still, there are differences to be accounted for. As one studies the early Buddhist literature, one encounters a certain atmosphere of dryness, of narrow and laborious self-culture, of strenuousness. One misses the atmosphere of effortlessness, fullness, ease and self-abandonment which one comes across, say, in reading Chaitanya, Mira, the Alvar saints and the other

devotional figures of Hinduism. In Buddhism one is particularly struck by the omission of any reference to God or soul, those mighty facts of spiritual experience which figure so much in the Upanishads, the Gita, the Mahabharata and in the religious consciousness of the country in general. Other differences of nuances and emphases generally relate to the misery and transitoriness of this life. These are why a reading of Hindu and Buddhist literatures leaves two distinctly different impressions on the mind.

But let us not stress the differences too far. As we have seen, there is an important tradition of the Vedanta which is very much akin to the life-denying trends in Buddhism. Similarly, there are many schools of Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist methods of sadhana which are akin to the more affirmative tradition of Hinduism. In these schools one does not pass into a void or Sunya effected through negation of all thought-forms or thought-complexes and through detachment from the world. Buddhism in these developments is no longer dry or flat, but rich and even luxuriant, though these powerful developments in Buddhism are not found in the earliest records and are not agreed upon by all schools.

Probably, in its world excursion, Buddhism followed the trail of Hinduism. It went where Hinduism was already known and honored. There it made a permanent niche in the affections of the people and destroyed nothing. Nourished by their psyche, it acquired a new wealth and became thoroughly indigenous. It was not governed by a distant mother-church. Instead, it drew its sustenance from the soil of its adoption. This prevented it from becoming the handmaid of imperialism, exploited from afar. Its center and authority was always local. It thus became

the genuine voice of the people who lived by it.

Recapturing their lost identity, regaining their sense of the divine and transcendent and uniting into a mighty force of living spirituality, let Hinduism and Buddhism, the two sister-religions, come forward and offer their healing message to a troubled world. In the absence of this message, inferior ideologies and life-philosophies are having a field day and are doing immense damage to humanity.

Yoga and Buddhism

By Vamadeva Shastri (David Frawley), New Mexico

It is not surprising that many of us born in the west, particularly after an initial exposure, are apt to regard Yoga and Buddhism as more or less the same. The differences that have existed between the two systems historically are less obvious to us than their commonalities. However, the tendency to find commonality between these two great spiritual traditions is not limited to the West. Swami Vivekananda, the first great figure to bring yoga to the West, examined the Buddhist Mahayana scriptures (sutras) and found much similarity between their key teachings and those of Vedanta. In recent years, with the influx of Tibetan refugees, including the Dalai Lama, into India since the Chinese occupation of Tibet, there has been a new dialogue between the two traditions that is bringing about greater respect between them.

Various syncretic Hindu-Buddhist teachings have existed through history. Buddha himself was born a Hindu and some

scholars have argued that Buddhism as a religion apart from Hinduism did not arise until long after the Buddha had passed away. A Siva-Buddha teaching existed in Indonesia in medieval times. Buddha became accepted as an avatar of Vishnu during the period when Buddhism was still flourishing in India, and many Hindus still consider that we live in the age of the Buddha-avatar. Most Hindus accept Buddha, even if they do not accept all Buddhist teachings.

However such syncretic trends did not exclude disagreements and debates between the two traditions, which were quite common historically. Nor did they ever succeed in fully uniting them. Their traditions and lineages remain separate to the present day. Generally, the Hindu Yoga tradition sought to absorb Buddhism into itself by reinterpreting Buddha in a more Hindu light. Buddhism, however, strove to maintain its separate identity. Most Hindu and Buddhist teachers, including those of the Yoga school of Hinduism, found it necessary to discriminate their doctrines, particularly on subtle levels of practice and insight. Hence, while we can honor the connections between these two systems, we cannot overlook their differences.

The Yoga Tradition: By Yoga here we mean primarily the classical Yoga system as set forth by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. However, Patanjali was not the inventor of Yoga, as many people in the West are inclined to believe, but only a compiler of the teaching at a later period. Classical Yoga was always part of the greater Hindu Vedic tradition. It clearly deals with the nature of the soul, God and immortality, which are the main topics of religion throughout the world. Its main concern is religious and by no means merely exercise or

health.

The Buddhist schools, of which there are four in classical Indian philosophy, though they shared many ideas with Vedic spirituality, like karma and rebirth, did not accept the authority of the Vedas and rejected a number of key Vedic principles. All Buddhist schools employ meditation, but some add more specific yogic practices, like pranayama and mantra. Such systems may be called Buddhist yoga by modern writers. However, yoga as a term is lacking in early Buddhist texts, particularly of the Theravadin type, and becomes prominent mainly in the Buddhist tantric tradition that developed later, particularly as practiced in Tibet.

The Buddhist Mahayana tradition, particularly in its tantric forms, uses breathing exercises, mantras, visualizations and deities, much like the Yoga tradition. The Theravadin tradition has less in common with Yoga, though it does use similar meditation and concentration methods. It generally rejects devotional worship and the use of deities such as occurs in yogic paths. In fact, it could be argued that Tibetan Buddhism, with its mantras, deities and yogic teachings, is closer to Hinduism in its teachings than to such Buddhist schools.

Buddhism grew up in a cultural cauldron of Hinduism. For this reason, Indian and Tibetan Buddhism have included ayurvedic medicine, Hindu astrology, Sanskrit, the same rules of iconography, the same forms of temple worship and other common factors. A number of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, like Ganesha and Sarasvati, appear in the Buddhist tradition. Some figures, like the Goddess Tara, appear in both. Yet, as

Buddhism moved to other countries, many of these connections were either lost or their basis forgotten. Nepal has remained one region of the Indian subcontinent in which both these religions have continued. In this regard Nepalese Hindus and Buddhists respect one another but seldom combine the teachings of these two different religions by way of their actual practices. They tend to follow one tradition or the other, but seldom both.

In the Yoga Sutras, only three sutras out of two hundred deal with asana, yogic postures. The great majority deal with meditation, its theory and results. Unfortunately, however, yoga today is most known for its asana tradition--the most popular, visible and outward form of the system. Buddhism, by comparison, is known as a tradition of meditation, as in the more popular forms of Buddhist meditation like Zen and Vipassana. Many people who have studied yoga in the West look to Buddhist teachings for meditation practices, not realizing that there are yogic and Vedantic forms of meditation which are traditionally not only part of the yogic system but its core teaching!

Yoga and Buddhism are both meditation traditions devised to help us transcend karma and rebirth and realize the truth of consciousness. They see the suffering and impermanence inherent in all birth--animal, human or Godly--and seek to alleviate it through developing a higher awareness. Both emphasize the need to dissolve the ego, the sense of me and mine, and return to the original reality that is not limited by the separate self. Both traditions emphasize enlightenment or inner illumination to be realized through meditation.

Both systems recognize dharma, the principle of truth or natural law, as the basic law of the universe we must come to understand. Buddhism defines itself as Buddha Dharma or the dharma of the enlightened ones, which is seen as a tradition transcending time or place. Yoga defines itself as part of the Hindu tradition called Sanatana Dharma, the universal or eternal dharma, which is not defined according to any particular teacher or tradition.

Divergence: The main differences between the two systems are over their cosmic view and way of practice. Vedic systems are built upon fundamental principles like the Self (Atman), the Creator (Ishvara) and Godhead (Brahman). Buddhism rejects all such ontological principles as mere creations of the mind itself. Apart from such philosophical differences, both systems share the same basic ethical values, like nonviolence, truthfulness, nonattachment and nonstealing. The vows that Buddhist monks take and those that monks and sadhus take in the yoga tradition are the same, as are those of the Jains.

Vedanta defines the Absolute as a metaphysical principle, Being-consciousness-bliss, Satchidananda or Brahman, in which there is perfect peace and liberation. [Though some would say that Satchidananda is saguna brahman and the transcendent absolute is nirguna brahman]. Buddhism does recognize an Absolute which is non-dual and beyond all birth and death, however, Buddhism generally does not allow it any definition and regards it as a void. It is sometimes called the Dharmakaya, or body of dharma, though Sanskrit Buddhist texts never call it Brahman.

Buddhism generally rejects the Self (Atma or Purusha) of yoga-Vedanta and emphasizes the non-Self (anatman). It says that there is no Self in anything and therefore that the Self is merely a fiction of the mind. Whatever we point out as the Self, the Buddhists state, is merely some impression, thought or feeling, but no such homogenous entity like a Self can be found anywhere. Even so, a number of Buddhist traditions, particularly traditions outside of India, like the Chan and Zen of China, have used terms like "Self-mind, one's original nature, the original nature of consciousness" or "one's original face," which are similar to the Self of Vedanta. But by and large, Buddhism has tended to lump the Self of Vedanta as another form of the ego or the misconception that there is a Self.

In contrast, the yoga-Vedanta tradition emphasizes Self-realization, or the realization of our true nature. Yoga-Vedanta discriminates between the Self, which is our true nature as consciousness, and the ego (ahamkara), which is the false identification of our true nature with the mind-body complex. The Atman of Vedanta is not the ego but is the enlightened awareness which transcends time, form and space.

Is there a God? The Yoga tradition is based upon a recognition of, respect for and devotion to God or the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. One of its main principles is that of surrender to God (Ishvara-pranidhana), which is said to be the most direct route to Self-Realization. This is perhaps the main point of difference between Yoga and Buddhism. Buddhism rejects God (Ishvara) or a cosmic lord and creator. It sees no need for any creator and considers that living beings arise through karma alone. Yoga emphasizes devotion and

surrender to God as one of the main spiritual paths, bhakti yoga, through which we open our hearts to God and surrender to the divine will. As Buddhism does not recognize God, devotion to God does not appear. That is why we don't find any significant tradition of great devotees and singers of divine love in Buddhism like Chaitanya, Ramakrishna, Tulsidas or Mirabai in the Hindu tradition. Buddhism does recognize devotion to the Buddha. However, devotion to great teachers does not quite strike the human heart with the same significance as devotion to the Divine Father and Mother of the universe.

If we equate the One Mind of the Buddhists with the One Self of Vedanta, make Buddha and God the same, give the Buddha the power of creation of the universe and make other such correlations, both traditions could be synthesized. However, prominent Buddhist leaders have yet to make such statements. Until they do, we cannot dismiss such differences as unnecessary, but must respect them. If you believe not only in karma and rebirth but also the existence of God or the Creator, you would be a Hindu, not a Buddhist in your views.

It is crucial that such meditation traditions as Yoga and Buddhism form a common front in light of the needs of this materialistic age. Their common values of protecting the Earth, nonviolence, recognition of the law of karma, and the practice of meditation are perhaps the crucial voice to deliver us out of our present crisis.