

Facets of the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism*

*Perry Schmidt-Leukel** in an interview with Frank Usarski*

Could you give us an overview over the “dogmatic” principles and the relevant traditional sources (sutras etc.) that (have) serve(d) as references for the Buddhist-Hindu encounter?

When we talk about “Buddhist-Hindu encounter” or “Buddhist-Hindu relations”, the first point that needs some clarification is what we mean by “Hinduism”. As a designation of a religious tradition the term is fairly new. Originally “Hindus” referred to the people living in India (or, at an earlier stage, to those living in the area of the “Hind”, i.e. the Indus river). It was only under the British colonial period that “Hinduism” was used as an umbrella term for the vast diversity of religious cults, rites, philosophical schools, etc. in India which were not Sikhs, Muslims, Jains, etc. Among the so-called neo-Hindu movement, that is, the great reform movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, “Hinduism” turned into a religious self-designation. In the course of this process the neo-Hindu reformers tried to create a common Hindu identity, despite the huge diversity of beliefs and practices covered by this term.

Among the common features of what was now meant to be “Hinduism” we find the acceptance of the Vedas as divine revelation (shruti). This, of course, refers to the Vedas as they were understood in the 19th century, that is, their older parts together with the comparatively younger Upanishads which were roughly composed between the 7th and 3rd ct. BCE and later on added to the Vedas. The older parts of the Vedas were the religious texts of a religion which is usually called Brahmanism. Buddhism arose in India around the 5th century BCE as part of the various Shramana movements. The Shramanas stood in opposition to much of the Brahmanical religion. Most importantly, the Shramanas introduced

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a new religious goal, the goal of salvation, closely connected to the idea of reincarnation. Both, belief in reincarnation and salvation as the highest goal, had been unknown in early Brahmanism, but were incorporated into Brahmanism through the Upanishads which had been composed under the influence of the new Shramana ideas.

So within the earliest texts of Buddhism we find a number of motives common to most of the Shramana groups: The Buddhists taught reincarnation and ultimate salvation – to be achieved through an experience of liberating insight (enlightenment) – and they opposed a whole range of features of Brahmanism: They rejected the authority of the Vedas (i.e. the older parts of it), they criticized the religious value of sacrifice (which was the central ritual act in Brahmanism) and of the cult of particular deities. The Buddhists also denied the Brahmanical claim that the spiritual worth of an individual and an individual's social / religious role can be determined by caste. This critique, however, was not so much driven by social concerns. The main reason behind this was that the Buddha himself belonged to the Kshatriya caste and was himself not a Brahmin. So from the Brahmanical point of view, the Buddha was not entitled to teach the Dharma (the religious truth). Moreover, the Buddha proclaimed the Dharma indiscriminately to people from all castes. This too was going against the Brahmanical idea that the Dharma must not be taught to members of the lowest caste.

The early Buddhist texts, as they have been preserved in the Pali-Canon, are full of often very harsh polemics against official Brahmanism. At the same time, the Buddhists claimed that they are the “true Brahmins” thereby contesting the official Brahmins in their religiously and socially prominent role.

Another important issue is that the early Buddhist texts also contain a number of statements which appear to be directed against one of the central teachings of the Upanishads: the Upanishads hold that the liberating insight implies an existential realization of the unity of one's true self (atman) with the divine ground of and in everything (Brahman); the Buddhists claimed that liberating insight implies the understanding that nothing of what makes up an individual's existence has the quality of an imperishable, blissful self or atman.

From which moment / period in time the Buddhist-Hindu encounter became manifest and what were the geographical and socio-cultural circumstances under which early encounters occurred?

When emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE) became a powerful patron of Buddhism, he prohibited the killing of animals. This was a severe blow against Brahmanism, because the ritual sacrifice of animals was prescribed in the Vedas and formed a major part of the Brahmins' livelihood. This made it very clear to the Brahmins that a state governed by Buddhist principles would hardly leave any space for them. Buddhism was now perceived not only as an intellectual rival but as a serious threat. And, under Ashoka – with his royal support – Buddhism rapidly spread within and outside the borders of his empire. Hence it is not surprising that after Ashoka's Maurya dynasty (2nd century BCE) we hear of fierce persecutions of Buddhism in India, inspired by Brahmanical circles.

Did the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism suffer modifications in the course of history, for example in terms of a greater mutual intimacy and/or (maybe unilateral) rejection, and, if yes, what intra-religious developments (within Buddhism/Hinduism) contributed to the changes in inter-religious (between Buddhism and Hinduism) relationships?

Buddhist-Hindu relations became really bad in the course of the first millennium CE. In the Puranic literature which now developed in Hinduism, Buddhism is frequently attacked. The influential Vishnupurana, for example, prescribes a complete social excommunication of Buddhists: no contact whatsoever; even looking at a Buddhist monk requires lengthy expiations; dining with a Buddhist leads to hell; and seeing a Buddhist in a dream is a bad omen. Famous Hindu philosophers like Kumarila (8th century) and Shankara (9th century) attacked Buddhism with philosophical and theological arguments. According to Shankara, everybody who seeks happiness should entirely disregard Buddhism. About Kumarila it is said (but we don't know to what extent this is historically true) that he instructed King Sudhanvan to solve the problem with the Buddhists by simply killing all of them, including children and the elderly. Indeed, there are records of several severe persecutions of Buddhists by Hindu kings in the second half of the first millennium. At the end of this period,

Buddhism had almost disappeared from India. Apparently there was no way for Hindus and Buddhists to live side by side within one and the same society.

Parallel developments can be observed during the same period on the Buddhist side. Buddhist philosophers engaged in heavy criticism and polemics against central Hindu tenets: the authority of the Vedas, the caste system, belief in a divine creator, and belief in a divine atman. In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist-Hindu conflict took the form of violent confrontation. The Mahavamsa, the major Buddhist national chronicle of Sri Lanka (composed in the 6th century CE or later) creates the image of Sri Lanka as Buddha's own country which will only prosper if Buddhism prospers. This meant to defend Buddhism primarily against the South-Indian Tamils who were Shaivite Hindus and frequently invaded Sri Lanka. According to the Mahavamsa, the Sinhalese ruler Duttagamani (2nd ct. BCE) went to war against the Sri Lankan Tamils "not for the joy of sovereignty" but "to establish the doctrine of the Buddha". After having slaughtered thousands of Tamils he was consoled by eight Buddhist saints (arhats). They assured him that these people had not been worth more than wild beasts, and that he had brought great glory to the doctrine of the Buddha (Mahavamsa 25:109ff). Up until today the Buddhist-Hindu conflict is one aspect of the Sinhala-Tamil war under which Sri Lanka is now suffering for the last 25 years.

Despite all these hostilities, Hinduism and Buddhism did in fact exert considerable influence upon each other. Buddhist ideas, practices and ideals found their counterparts within various Hindu developments, and a number of Buddhist texts, in particular Mahayana scriptures, reflect Hindu influence. Let me mention just two examples. The philosophical method developed within the Buddhist Madhyamaka school exerted a strong influence on Shankara and his Advaita-Vedantic interpretation of the Upanishads. And the Mahayana-Buddhist development of the concept of a universal Buddha-Nature being the true self of every sentient being and at the same time the ultimate reality behind everything exhibits a striking similarity to the Upanishadic Brahman-Atman teaching. Moreover, the whole question of how to combine the striving for ultimate liberation, and the corresponding spirituality of renunciation, with the obligation of living in this world and contributing to this society became a driving motive in the development of both religions.

Are there differences between Buddhist schools in terms of the Buddhist perception of / reaction against / collaboration with Hinduism?

As a result of both open hostilities and mutual influence, reciprocal inclusivistic superiority claims emerged. In Hinduism this took the form of the widespread teaching that the Buddha had in fact been an Avatar (incarnation) of God Vishnu. But while the usual task of an Avatar is to set things right and guide people back to the proper way, the function of the Buddha was to misguide those who deserved to be misguided, thereby causing their spiritual ruin and thus strengthening the orthodox followers of the Vedas. A similar claim is found in an influential Mahayana Sutra. The Karandavyuha Sutra – which is written in praise of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara – proclaims that God Shiva is in reality a creation of Avalokiteshvara, but that in the dark age, the Kali Yuga, deluded people venerate Shiva as the highest God, the creator, and are thereby be deprived of the way of enlightenment.

In general, the existence of the Hindu deities was not denied by the Buddhists. But they incorporated them into their own system and allocated them an inferior position. They are seen as powerful beings, but beings which are still bound to Samsara, the cycle of reincarnation. They are not enlightened or liberated and cannot assist on the way to liberation. They can, however, provide worldly favors. So in Theravada-Buddhism, up until today, one often finds a side temple for some major Hindu deities attached to a Buddhist shrine, and the devotees are encouraged to approach these deities for help in their mundane needs. Within Mahayana-Buddhism the Hindu deities became largely (but not entirely) replaced by the Mahayana Bodhisattvas who took over their function of supplying for worldly needs and often resemble the Hindu deities quite closely.

So there are some minor differences between the major Buddhist branches in relation to Hinduism, but essentially their attitude is quite similar. Within Hinduism one can state, in a rather generalizing way, that among the more theistic branches the rejection of Buddhism is stronger than among those who are influenced by Advaita-Vedanta, although, as I said before, Shankara himself had been a fierce opponent of Buddhism – despite the fact that he was influenced by Buddhist philosophy. The latter, however, caused the theistic Hindus to denounce Shankara as a crypto-Buddhist. Again, something similar is found within

Buddhism. Among Theravada-Buddhists there is the widespread view that Mahayana-Buddhism is a heresy which arose out of too much Hindu influence.

Is the Buddhist – Hindu encounter partly institutionalized in terms of special (regular) meetings or at least contextualized within inter-religious meetings of a wider scope? If there are special meetings, who is responsible for the organization of these events? Who is engaged in this kind of dialogue (individual representatives, associations, particular religious communities)?

A Hindu-Buddhist dialogue does not really exist. In India there is now a rapidly growing movement of newly converted Neo-Buddhists. This movement was triggered by Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), father of the modern Indian constitution and political leader of the so-called “untouchables”. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956 together with more than 300,000 of his followers. Today there are about six and half million Ambedkarite Buddhists in India. Ambedkar left Hinduism because of his rejection of the caste system and his conviction – in opposition to Gandhi – that the caste system is not reformable. Ambedkarite Buddhists are thus very anti-Hindu in their approach. Part of their conversion formula is a public denunciation of Hinduism. In Sri Lanka there is an ongoing Sinhala-Tamil war with religious overtones, and some of the Sri Lankan Buddhist monks are expressing themselves in a militantly anti-Hindu way. Moreover, the Sri Lankan constitution gives Buddhism a privileged place which can make Hindus feel like second-class citizens. Among the Indian Hindus there is now the very strong Hindutva movement with a range of political and quasi-military organizations. Their stance towards Buddhism is, however, not unanimous. The Hindutva movement defines “Hinduism” more in a nationalistic sense than in a religious one, and they tend to see the Buddha, and to some extent Buddhism too, as part of Hinduism. This, however, is strongly opposed by the Ambedkarite Buddhists in India.

The Neo-Hindu movement of the 19th and early 20th century and also (to some extent) the Buddhist Modernism of the same period entail some developments which could turn out to be fruitful for potential future Buddhist-Hindu dialogue. Anagarika Dharmapala, the most important Buddhist modernist, expressed himself rather positively regarding Advaita Vedanta. But at the same time, he was a strong Buddhist nationalist in relation to Sri Lanka and very much opposed to all forms of theism, whether Hindu or Abrahamic. On the Hindu side, the

neo-Hindu reformers were often quite appreciative of the Buddha. At the same time, they were critical of the caste-system. Both these points provide a good basis for a future Buddhist Hindu dialogue. Vivekananda, in particular, was full of praise for the Buddha, although he held that the message and the personality of the Buddha is better understood by Vedantic Hinduism than by official Buddhism. Nevertheless, he did acknowledge that Hinduism had significantly benefited from Buddhist influence. Vivekananda also saw the Buddha as a divine Avatar, but he explicitly rejected the classical view that the Buddha's role was of a mischievous nature. Buddhists, so far, have not reacted much to these developments within neo-Hinduism, although the Indian Buddhist scholar, Lal Mani Joshi, replied, belatedly though fairly constructively, to Vivekananda's view of Buddhism with his book *Discerning the Buddha* (1983). The only dialogue in more recent times of which I am aware is the one that was conducted between the Japanese Nichiren Buddhist Daisaku Ikeda and the Hindu politician and scholar Karan Singh (*Humanity at the Crossroads* 1988). It confirms that there is room for a certain approximation of Buddhist, in particular Mahayana Buddhist, and Hindu, in particular Avaita Vedantic, views on the understanding of the true self and the ultimate reality, so that the classical controversies of the Brahman-Atman doctrine might be bridged. However, this dialogue also shows that there is a tendency (particularly strong within the Hindutva movement) to form a kind of alliance between the purportedly non-dualistic religions of Hinduism and Buddhism against the purportedly dualistic Abrahamic religions, which are made responsible for a number of those evils that beset the modern world. This tendency, which I hold to be rather unwelcome, can and should be met within the wider context of a global inter-faith dialogue.

Within the major global inter-religious organizations, for example the "World Conference of Religions for Peace" or the "World Parliament of Religions", Hindus and Buddhists do meet on a fairly regular basis. But as far as I can see this has not yet inspired any institutionalized forms of Buddhist-Hindu dialogue in the Asian context. Nevertheless the global inter-religious movement provides certainly an ongoing positive stimulus for the future of Buddhist-Hindu relations. Both Hindus and Buddhists often present their own religions as being extraordinary tolerant and open, in distinction to the Abrahamic faiths which are usually perceived as particularly intolerant and absolutist. So the litmus test for the Buddhist and Hindu claims will



certainly be how they get along with each other in the future. The agenda of this dialogue, I suggest, should be less dominated by the big topics of global relevance. It should rather be focused on a critical review of those specific issues on which the mutual hostilities and reciprocal superiority claims between Hinduism and Buddhism were built. This, at least, seems to be healthier than any alliance motivated by the making of a new bogeyman.

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