

The Comparative study between Hinduism and Buddhism

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ABSTRACT: *Hinduism and Buddhism are two of the five major religions in our world today. They are widely practiced, and have survived for centuries. Both have similarities and differences, as do all forms of religion. Hopefully, in this paper I will show you the origin of the Hinduism and Buddhism, their cultural similarities and differences, I would also like to show how they compare and contrast.*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Basic Hinduism

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world, following Christianity and Islam. Hinduism stands for the faith and the way of life of most people who live in India. It is unknown where Hinduism was started and by whom. The beliefs of the Hindu's is very different then that of Christian's. Hinduism is based on beliefs in things such as reincarnation, dharma and in three main gods.

No one knows where Hinduism was started or who started it. Their oldest written documents, the Vedas, were first copied onto paper in 1000 B.C., they had however existed orally long before that time. Hinduism is thought to have originated from the Vedas. Hinduism has changed greatly since it was first practiced, there are now different sects, also known as denominations, and new beliefs have developed. There are still many things connected between the different sects of Hinduism, their basic beliefs are what ties them together.

The religion of Hinduism teaches us that each living body, including animals, is filled with an eternal soul. Hindus say that the individual soul was a part of the creator spirit, Brahma or existence from within their own **Atman**, roughly soul. It is each soul's job and wishes eventually to return to Brahma. It is not possible though because by a soul's sins, and impurities from the world, they are no longer pure and holy to return. Instead, a soul must become pure before returning to Brahma, who is absolutely pure. The process of becoming pure is so hard that no soul can become pure in only one lifetime. The soul is forced to live life after life until it is pure enough to return to Brahma. In Hinduism, attaining the highest life is a process of removing the bodily distractions from life, allowing one to eventually understand the Brahma nature within.

Basic Beliefs of the Hinduism Religion

Hinduism teaches that the individual soul of all living bodies, including animals, was part of the creator spirit, Brahma. They believe that each soul's job and wish is to eventually return to Brahma. No soul can return to Brahma, however until becoming clean of all impurities and sins of the world, they must be holy and pure to return to Brahma. The process of becoming pure enough to return to Brahma is not an easy task; it takes more than one life to cleanse oneself. The soul is forced to live life after life until it is pure enough to return to Brahma. The Hindus call the cycles of rebirth *samsara* or the Wheel of Life. It is called *moksha* when a soul is finally cleansed and ready to go back to Brahma. When a soul finally returns to Brahma, it is there for an eternity of contentment and ecstasy.

There are certain things the one must follow in order to be a Hindu, they must believe these things and live by them. The first is a belief in karma which is the result of one's good and bad deeds done in a lifetime. The second is a belief in dharma and Hindu traditions. They must believe in the three main Hindu gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. They must have a belief in reincarnation after death. They must have honor for the sacred Vedas. They must have a belief that if lived a religious life, the Wheel of Life can end and achieve *moksha*.

Hindu's worship many gods, but they believe in a single god, Brahma. Everything comes from Brahma, it does not matter who they worship, because ultimately all worship goes to Brahma. Brahma does not punish or reward those for their achievements in life; every soul creates their own rewards and punishments through karma. Karma rules what each soul will be in the next lifetime, it is formed by the person's good and bad deeds in each life; if a person had more good deeds than bad deeds then they have good karma, if they had more bad deeds than good, then they have bad karma.

Dharma is the ultimate balance of all living things; it belongs to everything, including the universe. Every soul is responsible for balancing their own dharma, the areas of dharma to balance are religious, social and within the family. They must keep their promises and remain faithful to religious rituals, while also taking care of their family. If a soul is unbalanced, then it will affect their karma. To some dharma is considered a tradition, duty and custom, but to Hindu it is spiritually more than that¹.

1.2. Basic Buddhism

The term *Buddhism* is now used to denote the teaching of the Buddha, a historical person who flourished some 25 centuries ago on the Indian subcontinent. This teaching has been described variously as a religion, a philosophy, a psychological system, an ethico-moral code, a socio-economic blue-print, and so on. No doubt all these aspects could be discerned in different parts of the Buddha's teaching, but the teaching is itself something more than all these combined. The term which Buddhists use to designate the teaching is *Dhamma* or *Dharma*². This term comes from a root term meaning "to uphold", and means the basic law which "upholds" the universe. It is therefore sometimes translated simply as Law or Norm. It conveys some idea of the unity that informs the whole body of the Buddha's teaching. We shall use the words *dhamma* and Buddhism as synonyms.

How can we relate the major points of this description to Buddhist religious philosophy? First, it is clear that the Buddha taught by skilful means. This is an important philosophical idea central to both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. The concept of skilful means (*upayakausalya*) is:

the ability to bring out the spiritual potentialities of different people, by statements or actions which are adjusted to their needs and adapted to their capacity³.

The presentations of celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas within the Mahayana are often seen as expedients that, though ultimately untrue, from the relative standpoint provide a focus for devotion and are given to help practitioners, ultimately leading them towards salvation and enlightened understanding. The meditation practice under discussion can thus be described within the context of skilful means. It is a skilful means for harnessing the mind's general business by letting it become preoccupied with the details of the visualization. This draws it from the outside world and its concerns, so that it can calm down of its own accord. The colours and content of the visualization provide interest but at the same time lead to stability. Often one is told to focus on the lower parts of the Buddha's form or on the lotus or throne if the mind is excited. If one then becomes mentally dull, one is encouraged to focus on the upper parts of the Buddha's body, for example on the face or between the eyebrows.

A second point to note is that the bodily form of the Buddha is extremely important, particularly as it relates to the central Buddhist religious doctrine of the three bodies or *kayas* of the Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhist religious philosophy (which encompasses elements not just of Tibetan, but also of Chinese, Korean and in particular Japanese schools) the distinctions are between the *Nirmanakaya*, the historical Buddha; the *Sambhogakaya*, which encompasses the whole range of celestial Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; and finally the *Dharmakaya*, which, because of its absolute and formless nature, cannot be conceptualised or indeed visualised⁴. The *Dharmakaya* is often called the enlightenment body, the state of Buddhahood itself: it is the nature of Mind, or emptiness^{5,6}. These distinctions are often presented in terms of temporal duration: the *Dharmakaya* is beginningless and endless; the *Sambhogakaya* has a beginning but is endless, while the *Nirmanakaya* is temporary⁷. The Buddha Sakyamuni is seen to have possessed all three bodies. These philosophical distinctions also have their individual personal bodily correlates. These are the three centres or 'gates', each correlating with one of the three bodies of the Buddha. The first is the head centre (between the eyebrows), this corresponds to the *Nirmanakaya* or physical body. The second is the throat centre, which corresponds to the *Sambhogakaya* and subtle energy flows and speech. And the third is the heart centre which corresponds to the mind or the *Dharmakaya*. Towards the end of the practice different coloured lights emanating from the three different sources and aspects of the Buddha's body are visualized as merging with the same three aspects of the practitioner's body. The focus is on the purification of the bodily elements, and this may be accomplished by means of sound and visualised light^{8,9}.

A key issue is the idea that everything can be viewed as a form of energy: not only reduced to forms of energy, but also transformed from one type or modality of energy to another. Notions of solidity are thus counterbalanced with ideas of change and mutability. The attempt is always to move away from the fixity of the normal mind and its attitude towards the world. This is also reflected in the description of the composition of the body. The Buddha is seen to be physically present but not solid; to be of light and similar to a rainbow, to be luminous but not solid. Tibetans use the term 'Rainbow Body' to symbolize enlightenment. This concern with the body of light is of course present in other religious traditions¹⁰. The purpose of this practice is an attempt to

undermine our notions of a fixed and rigid self-identity, to show rather that it is changeable, mutable and constantly shifting. The concepts of projection and transformation are central to this discussion:

All phenomena are projections of mind.
Mind itself does not exist
And is empty in its being.
Although empty, it manifests everything without obstruction⁵.

A third, philosophical, concern approached experientially in the meditation is the relationship between Samsara, the imperfect world in which we find ourselves with all its suffering, and Nirvana, the perfect state where suffering has ceased to exist. In Buddhist religious thinking this discussion revolves around the relationship between the relative and the absolute worlds. It is often expressed in the clear religious belief which states that Samsara and Nirvana are one. The problem arises from our view of the situation, not from the situation itself. These ideas relate closely to a central feature of Buddhism: that it incorporates a monist religious/philosophical structure. As Conze has stated: 'If all is one and the same, then also the Absolute will be identical with the Relative, the Unconditioned with the Conditioned, Nirvana with Samsara³'. Writers involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue have been deeply aware of this feature of Buddhist religion, and commentators from both sides of the dialogue have discussed the similarity between certain ideas in Buddhism and the occluded, monist side of Christian theology and mystical experience, particularly as expressed in the ideas of Meister Eckhart^{11,12}.

In the form of meditation under discussion, all elements of the individual's lived experienced field (i.e. Samsara) are visualized as being temporally replaced by elements of a pure land, i.e. Nirvana. Generally it is recommended that the visualization is carried out with the eyes open:

The dharma is a method that enables us to go from the state of ordinary being to the state of awakened being¹³.

Closely connected to the idea of the inseparability of the relative and the absolute worlds is the central philosophical tenet within Mahayana Buddhism of the empty or void nature of all phenomena. This is reinforced in the final stage of the meditation practice:

Vajrayana meditations are divided into two phases . . . The phase of creation . . . during which one mentally creates the appearance of the deity. The phase of completion . . . during which one dissolves the appearance into emptiness¹³.

The meditation practice is a skilful means by which one may recognize, or get a taste of, the empty or conditioned nature of all phenomena; that each is nothing in and by itself. As stated above, phenomena include such conditions as physical and mental sickness.

II. COMPARISON BETWEEN HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM

According to **S.Rahdhakrishnan**, "Buddhism, in its origin at least is an offshoot of Hinduism". Both **Hinduism** and **Buddhism** originated in the Indian subcontinent and share a very long, but rather peculiar and uncomfortable relationship, which in many ways is comparable to that of Judaism and Christianity. The Buddha was born in a Hindu family, just as Christ was born in a Jewish family. Some people still argue that Buddhism was an offshoot of Hinduism and the Buddha was a part of the Hindu pantheon, a view which is not acceptable to many Buddhists. It is however widely accepted that Buddhism gained popularity in India because it released the people from the oppression of tradition and orthodoxy. The teachings of the Buddha created hope and aspiration for those who had otherwise no hope of salvation and freedom of choice in a society that was dominated by caste system, predominance of ritual form of worship and the exclusive status of the privileged classes which the Vedic religion upheld as inviolable and indisputable.

Long ago, over 1500 years ago, Hindu tradition accepted the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. However, strong rivalry existed between both traditions in the subcontinent for a very long time. The followers of Shiva and the Buddha could hardly stand each other in the earlier times. There were instances of Buddhist persecution by Hindu rulers, though a great majority followed a policy of religious toleration. Sasank, a ruler from Bengal and contemporary of Harshavardhana vandalized Buddhist monuments and burnt the pipal tree under which the Buddha got enlightenment.

Despite the fundamental differences between both the religions, Hinduism and Buddhism influenced each other in many ways. The Buddhist notion of non-injury and compassion toward all living beings took deep roots in the Indian soil, while Mahayana Buddhism took cue from the traditional Indian methods of devotional

worship. Buddhism influenced the growth and development of Indian art and architecture and contributed richly to the practice of breathing and meditation in attaining mindfulness and higher states of consciousness. The Hindu tantra influenced the origin and evolution of Vajrayana Buddhism.

2.1. Similarities

Hinduism and Buddhism share some of the following similarities.

1. Both Hinduism and Buddhism emphasize the illusory nature of the world and the role of Karma in keeping men bound to this world and the cycle of births and deaths.
2. According to the Buddha, desire is the root cause of suffering and removal of desire results in the cessation of suffering. Some of the Hindu texts such as the Upanishads (Isa) and the Bhagavadgita consider doing actions prompted by desire and attachment would lead to bondage and suffering and that performing actions without desiring the fruit of action would result in liberation.
3. Both religions believe in the concept of karma, transmigration of souls and the cycle of births and deaths for each soul.
4. Both emphasize compassion and non violence towards all living beings.
5. Both believe in the existence of several hells and heavens or higher and lower worlds.
6. Both believe in the existence of gods or deities on different planes.
7. Both believe in certain spiritual practices like meditation, concentration, cultivation of certain bhavas or states of mind.
8. Both believe in detachment, renunciation of worldly life as a precondition to enter to spiritual life. Both consider desire as the chief cause of suffering.
9. The Advaita philosophy of Hinduism is closer to Buddhism in many respects.
10. Buddhism and Hinduism have their own versions of Tantra.
11. Both originated and evolved on the Indian soil. The founder of Buddhism was a Hindu who became the Buddha. Buddhism is the greatest gift of India to mankind.

2.3. Buddha's Attitude towards Hindus

Prior to his enlightenment, the Buddha was brought up in a traditional Hindu family. Before finding his own path, he went to Hindu gurus to find an answer to the problem of suffering. He followed the meditation techniques and ascetic practices as prescribed by the Hindu scriptures and followed by the Hindu yogis of his time. It is said that after becoming the Buddha, he showed special consideration to the higher caste Hindus especially the Brahmins (priests) and Kshatriyas (warriors). He exhorted his disciples to treat especially Brahmins with respect and consideration because of their spiritual bent of mind and inner progress achieved during their previous births. It is said that certain categories of Brahmins had free access to the Buddha and that some of the Brahmin ascetics were admitted into the monastic discipline without being subjected to the rigors of probation which was otherwise compulsory for all classes of people. The Buddha converted many Brahmins to Buddhism and considers their involvement a sure sign of progress and popularity of his fledgling movement. Much later, we find a similar echo of sentiment in the inscriptions of King Ashoka where he exhorted the people of his empire to show due respect to the Brahmins.

2.4. Differences

Following are some of the differences we can see in the principles and practice of these two religions.

1. Hinduism is not founded by any particular prophet. Buddhism was founded by the Buddha.
2. Hinduism believes in the efficacy and supremacy of the Vedas. The Buddhist do not believe in the Vedas or for that matter any Hindu scripture.
3. Buddhism does not believe in the existence of souls as well in the first cause, whom we generally call God. Hinduism believe in the existence of Atman, that is the individual soul and Brahman, the Supreme Creator.
4. Hinduism accepts the Buddha as an incarnation of Mahavishnu, one of the gods of Hindu trinity. The Buddhist does not accept any Hindu god either as equivalent or superior to the Buddha.
5. The original Buddhism as taught by the Buddha is known as Theravada Buddhism or Hinayana Buddhism. Followers of this do not worship images of the Buddha nor believe in the Bodhisattvas. The Mahayana sect considers the Buddha as the Supreme Soul or the Highest Being, akin to the Brahman of Hinduism and worships him in the form of images and icons.
6. The Buddhists consider the world to be full of sorrow and regard ending the sorrow as the chief aim of human life. The Hindus consider that there are four chief aims (arthas) in life which every being should pursue. They are dharma (religious duty), artha (wealth or material possessions), kama (desires and passions) and moksha (salvation.)
7. Hindus also believe in the four ashramas or stages in life. This is not followed in Buddhism. People can join the Order any time depending upon their spiritual preparedness.

8. Buddhists organize themselves into a monastic Order (Sangha) and the monks live in groups. Hinduism is basically a religion of the individual.

9. Buddhism believes in the concept of Bodhisattvas. Hinduism does not believe in it.

11. Buddhism acknowledges the existence of some gods and goddesses of Hindu pantheon, but gives them a rather subordinate status.

12. Refuge in the Buddha, the Sangha and Dhamma are the three cardinal requirements on the eightfold. Hinduism offers many choices to its followers on the path of self-realization.

13. Although both religions believe in karma and rebirth, they differ in the manner in which they operate and impact the existence of individual beings.

Of the two religions Hinduism is older perhaps by at least a millennium or two. Some Buddhist may argue that the Buddha that we know historically as born in the sixth century B.C. in the Indian subcontinent was but one in the line of many Buddhas that preceded him and would follow him. Such a belief may enjoy some validation and approval in the metaphysical realm of enlightened monks, just as the Hindus believe in the existence and continuation of sanatana dharma, (popularly known as Hinduism) through endless cycles of creation and dissolution of worlds spanning across a time frame of millions of years. However available evidence do not confirm the theory that Buddhism existed as a religion prior to the birth of the Buddha. In case of Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, we have evidence that he was the last in the long line of 24 Jain Thirthankaras, But in case of Buddhism we do not have such confirmation.

Technically speaking, Hinduism is not a religion but a group of religious and sectarian movements that share some fundamental and in some respects identical beliefs, regional variations, history, tradition and practices peculiar to the land and the times in which they originated and evolved. In contrast, Buddhism is a well established and organized religion having a set of beliefs and practices, commonly known as the Dhamma, based on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

III. CONCLUSION

We can safely conclude that in the first few centuries following the nirvana of the Buddha, Buddhism was an integral and significant part of the complex religious character of the subcontinent that was later came to be recognized as Hinduism by the outside world. However subsequently Buddhism crossed the boundaries of the Indian subcontinent and went on to play a much greater role in the whole of Asia. In the process it developed a very complex sectarian, theological and geographical diversity and tradition of its own to become one of the most significant and influential religions of the world. No wonder many people who are not familiar with the history of the Indian subcontinent fail to understand and notice the deep connection that existed between Hinduism and Buddhism in the earlier days and the significant ways in which they enriched each other.

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