

## Buddhist relations with Brahmanism and Hinduism

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In December 1999, scholars of Indology from different parts of the world (China, Indian, Belgium and the United States) met in New Delhi: at issue lay their different approaches to the Buddhist relations with Brahmanism and Hinduism. One might assume that the differences may be explained by either Buddhism was an anti-ritualistic tendency of Vedic origin or an independent religion of different tradition: the reality is more complex, for some of them, especially, Indians have expressed with a strong mind of faith of religion, whereas other scholars would demonstrate only from the theoretical and historical point of view, and still others face major problem in their misinterpretations of the prehistoric study. The existence alone of those world scholars argues for the complexity of the issue.

For over four decades, these differences in approaches have caused many problems in the issue of academic study of religion and subsequently much literature written in different languages (English, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, French and German) has been produced on these particular issues. In the foreword of the work of 2500 Years of Buddhism (New Delhi, 1956), the most prominent Indian scholar, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has described Buddhism as: an offshoot of the more ancient faith of the Hindus, perhaps a schism or a heresy. Since the Brahmanical standpoint has possessed India's scholastic field for about a millennium, it is no doubt and quiet certain that Indian scholars, such as Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, have sought to sum up the history of Buddhism in India largely from this particular standpoint.

The conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism, the transformation of the Buddhist heritage in India and the disappearance of Buddhism as a living faith from Indian soil during the early medieval centuries, were largely responsible for the growth of misconception on ancient Indian civilization and for the propagation of the Brahmanical standpoint during the medieval through modern times. Nevertheless, Buddhism should be studied from the Buddhist standpoint and its relations with Brahmanism and Hinduism should be studied from the historical standpoint and the scientific line. In this paper, I will focus on my disagreement with those current theories of the origin of Buddhism, of its early relation with Brahmanism and of its position with regard to Hinduism.

### II. The origin of Buddhism

It has been told that in India it is a fashion to speak and to write: Buddhism is a sect of Hinduism, Buddha was a Hindu, and Hinduism is so catholic as to tolerate and worship a heretical and anti-Vedic teacher like the Buddha. This comfortable theory has been so thoroughly propagated in the Indian soil that it will take a long years for scholars and historians to sweep away its illusions and clear the way for the growth of Buddhist study from historical standpoint and on scientific senses. These current theories, presented India's prevailing standpoints towards the origin of Buddhism, refer mainly to the Indian general faith, their attitude towards Buddhism, and the scholastic interpretations of Buddhism.

The Indian general faith means that almost from all circles of life of Indian people has a strong faith of belief in Hinduism rather than Buddhism at the present stage of the Indian society even though Buddhism has given deeply an influence to Hinduism either theoretically or practically. It's a common sense of Indian that Hinduism (actually a newly born religion

in the Indian soil), having converted most of Indians to its own faith, monopolizes not only the India's ideology, but also the India's way of life and thinking either in the political or economic or scientific fields. However, this kind of tendency --- the fundamentalist way of thinking --- set the Indians apart from the people of the world even today in the 21st century.

The Indian attitude towards Buddhism means that in the mind of the ordinary Indian people, they do concede that Buddhism merged into Hinduism, that the Buddha was a great Hindu reformer and that the Buddha was a great Hindu master. This last is important because it leads us, from beginning to end, to examine carefully and to think differently that Buddhism, as a separate and independent world religion cannot be studied beyond the historical and scientific perspectives. We may see that the people of India today are so sensitive and admired of their most beloved religion, their Vedic culture, and their mythological doctrines when we happened to meet them and have a further discussion with them.

The scholastic interpretation means that some Vedic and Brahmanical minded Indian scholars (modern Indian historians, national leaders and ideologists) have described: Buddhism as an off-shoot of the more ancient faith of Hindus, perhaps a schism or heresy. A few educated Hindus --- have specialized in Buddhist studies or studied something of Buddhism or some book on Buddhism --- do concede that Buddhism was deeply influenced by the Vedic thought in its origin and it was a heresy of Brahmanism. Archaeologically, at least, we cannot treat Buddhism merely as a heresy against a prevailing Brahmanical orthodoxy, but, on the contrary, Buddhism should be considered as a historical and independent practice --- the way of life ---and that has nothing to do with the so called the more ancient faith of Hindus.

As we see from the above, the current theory on the origin of Buddhism tells us that the Vedic and Brahmanical standpoint of tendency has possessed and monopolized not only the field of Indian ideology, but also the field of social and historical studies of Buddhist relation with Brahmanism. The story of the origin of Buddhism, told in one sentence, is a matter of street-talk for every grown-up Hindu irrespective of his or her knowledge of ancient Indian religious history and archaeology. In order to reveal and clarify the true features of Buddhism, we may figure most notable question of how Buddhism related itself with the more ancient faith --- the orthodox ---- Brahmanism of its time.

### III. Buddhist relation with Brahmanism

We shall refer to the view of the most eminent Indian scholar, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, whose viewpoint might be considered as a prevailing Indian standpoint towards Buddhist relation with Brahmanism. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's most mature opinion on this point is summarized: the Buddha did not feel that he was announcing a new religion; he was born, grew up, and died a Hindu; he was restating with a new emphasis the ancient ideals of the Indo-Aryan civilization. The ideological tendency of the Indian scholar towards Buddhism refers mainly to the traditional interpretation, the materialistic interpretation, and the fundamentalist interpretation of Buddhism related with Brahmanism.

The traditional interpretation means that Buddhism arose out of anti-ritualistic tendency within the religion of the brahmanas, held by those the Brahmanical standpoint possessed scholars. The fact is that the history of ancient India is a record of the two opposite ideologies, that of world-affirmation represented by the priestly brahmanas of the Vedic tradition (Brahmanism) and that of world-denial and world-transcendence represented by the ascetic sramanas of non-Vedic tradition (Buddhism). It is no doubt, historically, both Buddhism and Brahmanism represent two separate traditions, the Vedic tradition and the Sramanic tradition respectively, therefore, it is irrelevant to establish the theory of Vedic origin of Buddhism.

The materialist interpretation means that some scholars, under influence of the materialist

Interpretation of history of popularized by Karl Marx have sought to correlate the rise of ascetic and intellectual thought-currents of the age of Buddha (624-544 B.C.) to the rise of capitalism and mercantile middle class economy. This, however, is entirely speculative, for there is no clear evidence to prove the existence of capitalism in the Marxian sense nor of a money-economy controlled entirely by an organized middle class of society in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Moreover, it is impossible to demonstrate that the spiritual ideas of Bodhisattva (potential Buddha) are determined by that social consciousness being consequent on material progress; indeed, the materialist interpretation of Buddhism is an evidence only of the philosophical crudity of theories of theirs.

The fundamentalist interpretation means that in some Hindu's minds, the Buddha was the destroyer of Brahmanical idolatry because the most fundamental elements of pre-Buddhistic Brahmanism, the doctrine of sacrifice and the doctrine of four castes were criticized and rejected totally by the Buddha. In spite of its preaching of mercy to animals, in spite of the sublime ethical religion, and in spite of the hair-splitting discussion about existence or non-existence of a permanent soul, the whole building of Buddhism, ultimately, had tumbled down and was ruined at last. The criticism and condemnation made to the Buddha and his religion is not merely due to the study of philosophy and history of the religion but the fundamentalist tendency towards other religions as well.

As we see from the above, Buddhist relation with Brahmanism, elaborated by some Indian scholars represent the traditional standpoint of monopoly of India's scholastic field extended in the aspect of dialogue among different religions, ideological tendency of the Indian society and the academic study of religion. Some modern Indian scholars, with a strong Vedic and Brahmanical mind has attempted to make an assimilation of the doctrine of Buddhism with that of Brahmanism. Boldly stated, they wanted to show that Buddhism, as deeply influenced by Vedic thought, arose out of anti-ritualistic tendency within the religion of brahmanas; in other words, it is a heresy or a heretic of Brahmanism.

#### IV. Buddhist relation with Hinduism

Either in the eyes of the ordinary Indian or in the eyes of the scholastic Indian people, both Buddhism and Hinduism are considered as one, because there are some similarities within each of their doctrines and practices, even though Buddhism and Hinduism are absolutely two different systems or religious traditions. Dr. P. V. Kane, a famous Indologist has observed: Buddha was only a great reformer of the Hindu religion as practiced in his time; he did not feel or claim that he was forming a new religion, nor did he renounce the Hindu religion and all its practices and beliefs. However, when we talk about Buddhist relation with Hinduism, we should observe and examine carefully the term of "Hindu" from the historical perspective, the linguistic perspective and the archaeological perspective respectively.

The historical perspective means that Buddhist relation with Hinduism should be studied from historical standpoint and on scientific line; the study of Buddhism from the Hindu View would be a study of Hinduism but not Buddhism. It has been wrongly employed to support the modern Hindu view that Buddha himself claimed to teach the path of the ancient "Hindu" sages and to show that Buddha did not feel that he was announcing a new religion. The word "Hindu" does not occur in the statement of Buddha; nor does he refer to Vedic sages or Indo-Aryan seers or brahmanas (priests) as the teachers of that ancient path which he followed and practised.

The linguistic perspective means that the term "Hindu" is foreign coinage, of Persian and Arabic origins and stands for the medieval forms of Indian and Brahmanical religions. The word Hinduism began to be used for Indian religious traditions usually with a view to distinguish them from Christian and Islamic traditions in India. We cannot use the word Hinduism for pre-Puranic Brahmanism of the Vedic and Upaniadic age, though medieval Hinduism is based to some extent on the Vedic religion, just as Judaism before the birth of

Jesus Christ cannot be properly called Christianity though Christianity is founded on pre-Christian Judaism.

The archaeological perspective means that the occurrence of the word "Hindu" in any ancient Indian archaeological or literary source has yet been discovered since the time of Alberuni (cir. 1030 A. D.), perhaps, he first referred to Indians of non-Islamic faiths as the "Hindus" meant "infidels". The term "Hindu", a form of "Sindhu", used first by the Persians, occurs along with the word "Gadara", a form of "Gandhara", in an inscription of King Darius of Iran; and here is used in a geographical sense denoting people or country on the river Sindhu conquered by that monarch. In old Persian "Sa" is pronounced as "Ha"; "Sindhu" is called "Hindu" from which the Greeks further corrupted it into "Sintos" or "Indos" from which are derived the Arabic and Persian words Hindu and Hindustan and the English words Indian and India.

As we see from the above, Buddhism and Hinduism are differed completely either from the historical point of view or from the linguistic and archaeological point of view, although there is a partial similarities between later Buddhism and the teachings of some of Hinduism. There is a strong evidence of Buddhist influence in the language as well as in the doctrines of the Hinduism; therefore, it must be admitted that we cannot imagine Buddhism was an assimilation of Hinduism (actually the latter had smuggled some of important terms and teachings from the former). We can say it is wrong to treat the Buddha as a "Hindu", or a great reformer of the Hindu religion, since there was no Hinduism in his time.

## V. Conclusion

From the above discussion, we may conclude here that the current theories of the origin of Buddhism and its relations with Brahmanism and Hinduism elaborated by those --- the Vedic and Brahmanical standpoint strongly possessed --- the modern Indian scholars are, however, entirely speculative. Furthermore, it is understood that historically Buddhism --- the most constituent of the anti-Vedic and Brahmanical movement (the Sramanic tradition) --- arose out as an independent and separate religion in the India of the sixth century B. C. cannot be deeply influenced by Vedic thought in its origin or an assimilation of Hinduism. Contrary to both Brahmanism and Hinduism, the doctrine of four castes and sacrifice was denounced and rejected totally by the Buddha while it has been practiced even today in the communities of the former.

We can't study religion from this or that particular ideological standpoint merely because of our faith or merely because of our special favor to this or that religion, otherwise our eyes will be blurred even if we are taking an important task of a comparative study of religion. It has been wrongly employed to support the modern Hindu view that Buddha himself claimed to teach the path of the ancient "Hindu" sages and to show that Buddha did not feel that he was announcing a new religion. Furthermore, there is no correspondence or agreement between the basic view of early Brahmanism and early Buddhism; the two religious traditions had different backgrounds in the prehistoric Vedic epoch, and in the age of the Buddha.

As we just mentioned in the above, linguistically and archaeologically, the word of "Hindu" has something to do with Persians and Arabs in the medieval age of India. We are, therefore, not justified in using the words Hindu and Hinduism in the history context of the age of the Buddha; the phrase of "Hindu religion" in connection with pre-Muslim India is altogether meaningless and misleading. The Buddha was neither a Hindu nor a great reformer of Hinduism, since there was no "Hindu religion" in his time but only primitive Brahmanism and Vedicism; the teachings of the Buddha, no doubt, reformed many of the debased practices of Vedic religion, but he did not claim to be a reformer, neither Hindu scriptures nor Brahmanical texts recognize him as a reformer.

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[回主页](#)

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