

Buddhism & The Bahá'í Writings:

An Ontological Rapprochement

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Dedicated to the memory of Rad Gajic (1948 – 2006)

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Introduction

Buddhism is one of the revelations recognised by the Bahá'í Faith as being divine in origin and, therefore, part of humankind's heritage of guidance from God. This religion, which has approximately 379 million followers[1] is now making significant inroads into North America and Europe where Buddhist Centres are springing up in record numbers. Especially because of the charismatic leader of Tibetan Prasangika Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, Buddhism has achieved global prominence both for its spiritual wisdom as well as for its part in the struggle for an independent Tibet. Thus, for Bahá'ís there are four reasons to seek a deeper knowledge of Buddhism. In the first place, it is one of the former divine revelations and therefore, inherently interesting, and second, it is one of the 'religions of our neighbours' whom we seek to understand better. Third, a study of Buddhism also allows us to better understand Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that all religions are essentially one.[2] Moreover, if we wish to engage in intelligent dialogue with them, we must have a solid understanding of their beliefs and how they relate to our own.

We shall begin our study of Buddhism and the Bahá'í Writings at the ontological level because that is the most fundamental level at which it is possible to study anything. Ontology, which is a

branch of metaphysics,[3] concerns itself with the subject of being and what it means 'to be', and the way in which things are. For example, it is readily apparent that a physical object such as a hockey puck, an idea like Einstein's relativity theory and attribute of redness are three different kinds of realities, have different ways of existing and are related to the world in different ways. We do not treat them alike because as a result of experience though often unconsciously, we perform an ontological analysis that says although we can throw another physical object such as a ball or a chair at the goalie, we cannot throw Einstein's theory or redness at him. This is an example of practical, every-day, conventional ontology. At a deeper level, ontology concerns itself with questions such as 'What is being?' or "Why is there something rather than nothing?" or 'What do we mean when we talk about a 'thing'?'.

Abstruse as questions like these might appear, they are dealt with directly or indirectly by all philosophical systems, religions and even by science. For example, if we ask, 'What is a thing – in this case a flower?' we will get various, ontologically based answers. A scientist will answer that it is ultimately a self-organising aggregation of atoms whose materials inter-act among themselves in certain ways and it is a product of evolution, a Madhyamaka Buddhist will say that it is a conventionally existing aggregate produced by dependent origination and ultimately empty, whereas a Bahá'í, a Christian and a Muslim might reply that ultimately it is a creation of God. In all cases we have fundamentally different ontologies in regards to the kind of things that exist – physical beings and a God – and their ways of acting. In other words, both answers contain an implicit ontology.

The ontology explicitly or implicitly present in every idea-system functions like a constitution: it is the philosophical frame of reference in which ideas take on meaning and against which they must not offend. It determines whether or not an idea is viable in its particular context. If an idea offends against its ontological frame of reference, then problems of logical consistency arise and create all kinds of problems in the idea-system. For example, if we introduce the concept of an actively participating God into the reigning physicalist and positivist ontology of science, then we could start formulating answers to scientific questions in terms of God's will – something that is hardly repeatable, measurable, predictable and testable as required by science. The introduction of a participant God into the ontology of science would create all kinds of consistency problems because that concept contradicts the goal of explanation strictly by physically measurable means. The ontological constitution of science does not allow such a concept.

Like science, every religion has an ontology which is the basis of its identity and, of course, the basis for its differences from other religions. From this it also follows that if we seriously intend to study how two religions are alike, then we must compare their respective ontologies. Without that, no philosophical understanding of a religion is possible.

However, before we plunge into our exploration, we must draw attention to the fact that contrary to the impression given by many popular books, Buddhism does not speak with ‘one voice’ even on some fundamental, ontological issues. For example, the often cited concept of emptiness is interpreted in at least three logically incompatible ways. Even the famous anatman or no-self doctrine is subject to various interpretations and at least one major Mahayana sutra, The Mahaparinirvana Sutra specifically asserts the existence of a self. Of course, it is not up to this paper to decide which doctrine represents ‘true Buddhism’; that is best left to Buddhists to settle amongst themselves. All this paper can do is point out and explore the ontological similarities wherever they exist in the spectrum of Buddhist ontology. Doing so, will cover the following topics: anicca (impermanence); momentariness; dependent origination; God; nirvana; the trikaya and the concept of Manifestations; emptiness; anatman (no-self) and re-incarnation.

Anicca

Logically speaking, the fundamental ontological principle of Buddhism is the concept of anicca, universal impermanence or the transitoriness of all things. In the words of the Buddha,

Impermanent are all component things,
They arise and cease, that is their nature,
They come into being and pass away,
Release for them is bliss supreme.[4]

Impermanence is also ensured by the phenomenon of dependent origination, according to which everything that is influenced or conditioned by other beings – which is everything that exists - inevitably comes into and passes out of existence, a process that is a constitutive feature of their being. Anicca includes absolutely everything that exists and is not confined to material things. It includes us personally, the mind, thoughts, emotions, ideas, consciousness, all possible human and non-human conditions and states. In other words, nothing is eternal, and this avoidance of ‘eternalism’, (as well as the opposite extreme of ‘annihilationism’) that is, avoidance of the belief that anything can be unconditioned and permanent is a foundational theme in Buddhist philosophy.[5] According to Mangala R Chinchore, anicca or impermanence is the bedrock concept of Buddhist ontology.[6] In her view, “Buddhists seek to uphold as uncompromisingly as possible primacy of becoming over being”[7] to which she adds: “Further, the contention that becoming alone is what really is, is strong enough . . . to satisfactorily account for the nature of the real and/or human.”[8] In other words, a thorough understanding of becoming will help us account for the natural world as well as our own identity.

The reason for accepting the foundational status of anicca lies in the first of the Four Noble Truths according to which all existence is dukka, variously translated as suffering or unsatisfactoriness. This is what impels us to ‘seek refuge in the Buddha’ in order to attain

ultimate salvation from change. Things are unsatisfactory and cause suffering precisely because we fail to recognise and accept that they do not endure and this in turn leads to all the difficulties associated with ‘grasping’ or trying to prevent change. From this we can see why the doctrine of anicca lies not only at the foundation of Buddhist ontology but also at the basis of its moral teachings. Meditating on impermanence is an essential part of Buddhist contemplative practice.

Anicca in the Bahá’í Writings

The Bahá’í Writings readily accommodate the doctrine of anicca or universal impermanence. Abdu’l-Baha advises us that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose--that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence. So this flower, this hyacinth, during a certain period of time was coming from the world of nonexistence into being, and now it is going from being into nonexistence. This state of motion is said to be essential--that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn.

Thus it is established that this movement is necessary to existence, which is either growing or declining. [9]

When we examine this statement, we note, first of all, its categorical nature, as indicated by the words “nothing”, “all things”, “everything”, “necessary” and “essential.” In other words, the phenomena described is applicable to all things without exception regardless of whether they are natural or man-made. Next, we notice the flat assertion not only that all things are in motion but that “movement is necessary to existence.”[10] Moreover, the concept of ‘movement’ and ‘motion’ is not restricted to a change of physical place as indicated by the reference to growth and decline which involve changes of augmentation, complexification, actualisation, transformation, reception, causal action, synthesis, catalysis, decay and perishing. More significantly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares, “all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence.”[11] This change is an “essential requirement”[12], that is, an essential attribute for the thing to exist as the kind of thing it is, for example, fire. Consequently, there is no doubt that the Bahá’í Writings agree with Buddhist ontology on the issue of anicca or transitoriness as the essential, that is, constitutive feature of all existence. As Bahá'u'lláh says we should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness.[13] Each of us as a “fleeting shadow”[14] and our time here as a “dust heap of a fleeting moment.”[15]

The Doctrine of Momentariness

Having recognised that Buddhism and the Bahá’í Faith agree on universal impermanence in the phenomenal world, it is important to explore the extent of the similarity. For example, does it

extend to the doctrine of momentariness in any of its early or later developments?[16] In other words, can the Bahá'í Writings accommodate the idea that in the phenomenal world what appears as an 'entity' is really a sequence of momentary states and not an enduring substance of some kind? Setting aside for now the interpretations of differing schools – for the Madhyamika, this series was unified by a similarity between moments, while in the earlier Abhidharma philosophy, each moment was a completely discrete entity[17] – can the Bahá'í Writings accommodate the concept of perpetual perishing and creation as described, for example, by Stcherbatsky: “The elements of existence are momentary appearances, momentary flashings into the phenomenal world out of an unknown source.”[18] Such is, indeed, the case. Bahá'u'lláh says,

Verily, the Word of God is the Cause which hath preceded the contingent world--a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times. Immeasurably exalted is the God of Wisdom Who hath raised this sublime structure.[19]

The categorical nature of this statement is evident, asserting that at all times, without exception, creation is being “renewed and regenerated.”[20] This re-enforces the notion that change is an essential or constitutive not accidental attribute of existing things, that simple existence unavoidably involves coming into and passing out of existence on a continuous basis. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá expresses a similar idea when he says, “Note thou carefully that “in this world of being, all things must ever be made new.”[21] We must keep in mind that the “world of being” refers to all created existence, even though, in this particular case ‘Abdu'l-Bahá he focuses on the specific ways in which the human spiritual and cultural world has been renewed under the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh. What is especially noteworthy in this quotation is the use of the categorical “ever” which may be read as functioning like the phrase “at all times”[22] in the statement by Bahá'u'lláh. We also note that one of the names of God is the “Resuscitator”[23], which does not necessarily imply resuscitation only at the transition from one age to the next but may also imply ‘resuscitation’ on a continuous basis as suggested by the other divine name, the “Sustainer.”[24]

We may, therefore, conclude that on the issue of momentariness, the Bahá'í Writings and Buddhist ontology are in agreement, though the Bahá'í Writings do not elaborate and develop this theme as much as Buddhism does. Why this should be the case may be explained by the fact that the two dispensations have different missions to accomplish or, it may only appear to be the case because not all of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings have been published at this point. What is germane to our study is that the doctrine of momentariness can be accommodated by the Bahá'í Writings.

Dependent Origination

Dependent origination is another fundamental ontological tenet of Buddhism, so much so that the Buddha says, “Whoso understands dependent origination, understands the Law [Dhamma or Dharma] , and whose understands the Law understands dependent origination.”[25] The “Law” in this case is the order of the universe, namely, that fact that everything arises as a result of causes or conditions and that everything declines as a result of causes and conditions. As noted

above, the usual Buddhist formula for causality is

When there is this, that is.
With the arising of this, that arises.
When this is not, neither is that.
With the cessation of this, that ceases.[26]

In other words, everything arises or falls in dependence on previous conditions or causes, and nothing arises without such conditions or causes. In the words of the renowned scholar Theo. Stcherbattsky, “every point instant of reality arises in dependence upon a combination of point-instants to which it necessarily succeeds, it arises in functional dependence upon a ‘totality of causes and conditions’ which are its immediate antecedents.”[27] In other words, nothing is fully independent from or uncaused by or unconditioned by anything else and we exist as long as the appropriate causes are present. Things do not exist in and of themselves which in effect is to say that their being is relative and not absolute.

Before further exploration of dependent origination, let us see to what extent the Bahá’í Writings can accommodate these ideas. For example `Abdu'l-Bahá, says,

There is no doubt that this perfection which is in all beings is caused by the creation of God from the composing elements, by their appropriate mingling and proportionate quantities, the mode of their composition, and the influence of other beings. For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association. Finally, the perfection of each individual being--is due to the composition of the elements, to their measure, to their balance, to the mode of their combination, and to mutual influence. When all these are gathered together, then man exists.[28]

Ultimately, of course, all beings depend on God, Who is the Absolute, uncaused and unconditioned ground of being, that makes everything else possible. This belief in an ultimate cause is, as we have seen, compatible with most Mahayana schools. The similarity is even more striking if we recall that according to the Bahá’í Writings the eternal creator requires an eternal creation.[29] The essential theme of this passage is that all phenomena also come into existence as a result of proximate causes, that is, the inter-action and influence of other elements, and that all phenomena are connected “like a chain” of mutual influences and effects. There is no phenomenon that is not dependent on the action of others for its “existence, development and growth.”[30] Similarly, `Abdu'l-Bahá says, “all the members and parts of the universe are very strongly linked together in that limitless space, and this connection produceth a reciprocity of material effects.”[31] Here, too, we discern the idea that mutual influences lead to the phenomenal or “material effects” we observe in nature. In other words, all phenomena exist dependently on other phenomena (and ultimately on God as the ground of being) and relatively, which is to say, their existence is not absolute, and is part of an on-going universal process.

There can be no doubt that the Bahá'í Writings recognise the principle of dependent origination. This is reinforced by the following elaboration by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

As the perfection of man is entirely due to the composition of the atoms of the elements, to their measure, to the method of their combination, and to the mutual influence and action of the different beings--then, since man was produced ten or a hundred thousand years ago from these earthly elements with the same measure and balance, the same method of combination and mingling, and the same influence of the other beings, exactly the same man existed then as now. This is evident and not worth debating. A thousand million years hence, if these elements of man are gathered together and arranged in this special proportion, and if the elements are combined according to the same method, and if they are affected by the same influence of other beings, exactly the same man will exist. For example, if after a hundred thousand years there is oil, fire, a wick, a lamp and the lighter of the lamp--briefly, if there are all the necessities which now exist, exactly the same lamp will be obtained.[32]

In this statement 'Abdu'l-Bahá applies the concept of dependent origination to human evolution, asserting that the same combination of elements and influences would lead to the same result in "the same man." He then provides a simpler illustration with a lamp and a wick. Anthony Tribe and Paul Williams make the same assertion and draw out one of its logical implications when they state that "In particular, our own existence as embodied individuals is the result of the coming together of appropriate causes, and we exist just as long as the appropriate causes keep us in existence." [33] When the influencing causes and conditions change, so do we – which is the logical converse of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that if the same conditions arise, so will the identical object.

It seems clear, therefore, that the Bahá'í Writings and Buddhism agree on the ontological principle that all parts of phenomenal reality is ruled by dependent origination.

The Absolute

The universality of dependent origination inevitably leads to the question of whether or not there are any exceptions to this principle, a crucial issue, since the answer determines whether or not Buddhism is or could be seen as a theistic religion. At this point it is necessary to point out that theism does not necessarily refer to a personal, Judeo-Christian or Islamic God Who is personally involved with His creation. Classical deism, for example, rejects any notion of a God with any personal interest in creation. If we examine the Bahá'í concept of God, then we see that His most fundamental ontological characteristic is complete independence, the fact that in Himself, God does not depend on anything but Himself, which is precisely why He is frequently called "the Self-Subsistent" [34] To emphasise this point, Bahá'u'lláh states, "No tie of direct intercourse can ever bind Him to the things He hath created, nor can the most abstruse and most remote allusions of His creatures do justice to His being." [35] In Buddhist terms, God is not subject to dependent origination, is not a phenomenon and for that reason is absolute. Ontologically speaking, such independence or absoluteness is an absolutely essential

requirement in the Bahá'í concept of God.

There is no question that Buddhist philosophy recognises exceptions to dependent origination. Sometimes, this exception to dependent origination is referred to as nirvana, which according to The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion, is:

“the departure from the cycle of rebirths . . . and entry into an entirely different mode of existence. It requires the overcoming of the three unwholesome roots – desire, hatred and delusion – and the coming to an end of active volition. . . . Nirvana is unconditioned.”[36]

If nirvana is “unconditioned” then it is not affected or shaped by anything else – but being affected by others is precisely the key requirement of being subject to dependent origination. In other words, Buddhism admits that there is at least one exception to dependent origination, that there is at least one ‘thing’ that is not describable as a phenomenon like the others. This is plainly evident in the Buddha’s description of nirvana in the following terms:

There is, monks, an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. If, monks, there were not this unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded. But because there is an unborn, a not-become, the compounded.[37]

Here we see a description of nirvana as a state that is completely unconditioned by anything external and completely unchanging from within. It has no origin, no process of becoming and no dissolution because it is not compounded. Ontologically speaking, it is the opposite of the phenomenal world, indeed, something that transcends it – and, therefore, qualifies as a true refuge. The Buddha also describes nirvana as:

the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unaging, the stable, the undisintegrating, the unmanifest, the unproliferated, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the unailing state, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom, the unadhesive, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge...”[38]

Here, too, we observe how nirvana is free of all the troubles and vicissitudes of phenomenal existence as shaped by dependent origination. It is also noteworthy that in contrast to the previous description, we see nirvana described in largely positive, even poetic, terms and even the negatives such as “unailing” are descriptions of the positive. This should not surprise us too much since, contrary to popular impressions, there was “within Buddhism a long tradition of positive language about nirvana.”[39] In keeping with this positive characterization of nirvana, The Lankvatara Sutra says, “Nirvana does not consist of mere annihilation”[40] for if it did, the Buddha would have fallen into the extreme of nihilism when it is His mission to have “all beings free from the notion of being [realism or eternalism] and of non-being [nihilism or annihilationism].”[41]

The significance of nirvana being an exception to dependent origination is that in ontological terms, it shows that there is some kind of absolute, i.e. something not subject to influence and change. This at least provides a foundation of similarity with Bahá'í concepts of the ontology of God as provided by His Manifestations. Thus, from a Bahá'í ontological perspective, it is not quite accurate to say that Buddhism rejects all absolutes, most obviously in the case of the Theravada which rigorously distinguishes nirvana from the phenomenal world or samsara. In the Theravada Pali Sutras, “there is not the least insinuation that this reality [nirvana] is metaphysically indistinguishable at some profound level from its manifest opposite, samsara.”[42] Indeed, for the Theravada the antithesis of samsara and nirvana is the basis of the quest for liberation. From a Theravada perspective, if there were no difference, there would be no point to the whole idea of liberation from the imperfect samsaric world.

The Ontology of Nirvana

It may be objected that seeking refuge in nirvana cannot be compared to seeking refuge in God or the “spiritual Kingdom” of the Bahá'í Writings. God, after all, is an ontological entity and the “spiritual Kingdom” may well be interpreted as such. However, with nirvana matters are not so clear since, as many renowned scholars have noted, Buddhism does not speak with one voice on this subject.[43] This is because to understand the ontology of nirvana according to the Buddha's middle way, that it is, “between existence and non-existence, between annihilationism and eternalism.”[44] It is a difficult concept to grasp since it refers to nothing we know in ordinary experience; even the concepts of ‘being’ and non-being’ do not describe it accurately. Thus, it is not surprising to see a variety of views among scholars. For example, according to David J. Kalupahana it is “untenable”[45] to refer to nirvana as a metaphysical reality, something absolute, eternal and uncompounded, and hence a noumenal behind the phenomenal.[46]

He rejects those who see it as an “ultimate Reality”[47] yet among those doing so are the great scholars Walpola Rahula, Edward Conze and D.T. Suzuki. According to Rahula, human language is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality which is Nirvana.[48]

In making his point, Rahula refers extensively to the Dhatuvibhanga-sutta (# 140) of the Majjhima-nikaya to support his claim. In his explication of chapter 5 of The Diamond Sutra, one of Mahayana Buddhism's most important documents, Conze writes “In his true reality the Buddha is not produced by anything. . .”[49] This means that the true Buddha, the Dharmakaya, unlike all other phenomena, has a “special status of an Absolute which is in itself uncaused and unconditioned.”[50] The renowned scholar D.T. Suzuki has a similar view, telling us that nirvana “has acquired several shades of meaning, some psychological and ontological.”[51] He sees “Absolute Nirvana”[52] as a “synonym of the Dharmakaya,”[53] which, as Dharmakaya “is not only a subjective state of enlightenment but an objective power through whose operation this beatific state becomes attainable.”[54] The Dharmakaya is one of the names by which the Suchness, “the ultimate principle of existence,” [55] is known especially when it is considered “as the fountain-head of life and wisdom.”[56] In other words, the attainment of nirvana is the attainment of Dharmakaya and since Dharmakaya has an ontological aspect, (as a fountainhead, as an objective power) so perforce, does nirvana. Suzuki even claims that Nagarjuna's

Mulamadhyamikakarika “speaks of Nirvana as a synonym of Dharmakaya,”[57] that is as something that “is eternally immaculate in its essence and constitutes the truth and reality of all existences.”[58] For his part, Edward Conze writes, that among other things, nirvana is “power, bliss, and happiness, the secure refuge. . . that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality, that it is the Good. . .”[59] Here, too, we observe that nirvana has ontological aspects, being a “power,” the “real Truth” and the “supreme Reality.” More recently, Buddhologist Steven Collins also declares that nirvana “is a real external and timeless Existent, not merely a concept....It is ontologically, . . .”[60] a view reflected by Alfred Scheepers, who writes that “Nirvana is a real existent, it is not a nought.”[61] This view can also be reinforced by referring back to the quotations from Udana 80-81. In conclusion, if we accept the view of scholars like Suzuki, Rahula and Conze, it seems reasonable to claim that a comparison between seeking refuge with an unconditioned ontologically real entity, called in one case, God, and an unconditioned, ontologically real entity called nirvana (or Dharmakaya[62]) is a genuine similarity between Buddhism and the Bahá’í Writings.

However, not all Mahayana thinkers would agree that nirvana is different from the phenomenal world of dependent origination. For these, “the assumption of any kind of duality is considered as the basic error of logical thinking.”[63] According to Nagarjuna,

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence [samsara] and nirvana.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvana and cyclic existence [samsara][64]

This, of course, is the famous doctrine of the identity of nirvana and samsara, a doctrine that is also found in The Heart Sutra:

Form is emptiness and the every emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form.[65]

According to this sutra, form, the samsaric world, and emptiness, that is, nirvana are equal and convertible terms, a claim that eliminates all dualities and transforms one into the other.[66] Moreover, “Samsara is Nirvana, because there is, when viewed from the ultimate nature of the Dharmakaya, nothing going out of nor coming into, existence [samsara being only apparent]: Nirvana is samsara when it is coveted and adhered to.”[67]

This echoes The Heart Sutra’s statement that “there is no origination, no stopping, no path . . . no attainment and no nonattainment.”[68] What all this means in effect, is that opposites do not really, that is, ultimately, clash; even “an affirmation and negation, existence and non-existence are not to be held apart as two.”[69] Therefore, “Nirvana is not something transcendental or that it stands above this world of birth and death, joy and sorrow, love and hate, peace and struggle.”[70]

Here, in western terminology, perfection (nirvana) and reality (samsara) – correctly viewed – are one and the same. However, there is little doubt that the Bahá'í ontology favours the Theravada understanding that nirvana and samsara are ontologically distinct and not to be conflated as the Mahayana seems to do.

Notwithstanding the view that nirvana is identical with samsara, the Mahayana does not lack 'analogues of the absolute,' i.e. entities that are not subject to dependent origination. The first of these is the Dharmakaya.

Buddhism and the Dharmakaya

As David S Kalupahana points out, there was right from the beginnings of Buddhism a struggle against tendencies towards “absolutism,”[71] that is, a tendency to see the Buddha as absolute, unconditioned, non-relative and beyond dependent origination. There was an impulse to see the Buddha in transcendental and absolute terms, to turn him into an ontologically superior being with complete omniscience. As a result, “the conception of Buddha in the Mahayana caters to the psychological needs of ordinary people . . . and, in a way, it is similar to the conception of God in many of the theistic religions . . .”[72] This led to the development of the trikaya or three bodies doctrine of the Buddha. The Buddha has a transformation or ordinary earthly body (nirmankaya) which can be perceived by the senses; this is the historical Shakyamuni Who lived around 500BCE. The second body is the samboghakaya, through which are apparent the various appearances of the Buddha preaching the Dharma to the bodhisattvas and other inhabitants of the infinite pure Buddha-lands. All our images of the Buddha are also appearances of the samboghakaya. In his samboghakaya the Buddha manifests not only superhuman wisdom but also the thirty two major signs of perfection and the eighty lesser features of excellence.[73] The third body is the Dharmakaya, the absolutely true nature or essence of the Buddha, which is unconditioned by dependent origination[74], and which “universally responds to the spiritual needs of all sentient beings in all times and in all places. . .”[75] Lest it be thought that Dharmakaya is not ontologically real, Asvaghosa himself says that “suchness or Dharmakaya in its self-nature [svabhava] is not a nothing [shunyata]”[76] which is why Suzuki, in his notes to Asvaghosa, concludes that “Dharmakaya . . . signifies that which constitutes the ultimate foundation of existence, one great whole in which all forms of individuation are obliterated, in a word, the Absolute.”[77] In his history of the concept of the Buddha, contemporary scholar Guang Xing notes that the eternal and universal Dharmakaya became the basis of the infinite world as well as the pure nature of all phenomena . . . Thus the dharmakaya ontologically became the principle of the universe since it is identified with the tatha, the true nature of all dharmas.[78]

Later he adds, “First, the dharmakaya is the non-dual reality, the impersonal principle of the universe and ontologically the foundation and support of everything.”[79] From this it is clear that the Dharmakaya is or functions positively as a ground of being, as that which must necessarily exist in order for all other things to be. This, of course, is precisely the ontological function of God in the Bahá'í Writings, and, for that matter in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Moreover, in reference to Buddhist teachings about emptiness, Asvaghosa says, “Suchness or Dharmakaya is not empty but is endowed with numberless excellent qualities.”[80] Since emptiness and relativity are the attributes of all things subject to dependent origination, not being empty makes the Dharmakaya unlike any other kind of being. Not being subject to dependent origination or the twelve causes, also means that it neither arises nor ceases, that is, it is eternal and hence not subject to dukka or unsatisfactoriness, is free of ignorance, grasping and the body. As Guang Xing points out, it is “lacking movement, change, thought and even action”[81] in a manner reminiscent of the Bahá’í statement that God is beyond “ascent and descent, egress and regress.”[82] Like God in the Bahá’í Writings, the Dharmakaya is also empty of all finite attributes.[83] One of the major sutras, The Lion’s Roar of Queen Srimala states

The Dharmakaya of the Tathagata [Buddha] is named ‘cessation of suffering’ and it is beginningless, uncreated, unborn, undying, free from death, permanent, steadfast, calm, eternal, intrinsically pure, free from defilement-store, . . .[84]

Given the teachings about the Dharmakaya demonstrated above, it is reasonable to conclude that at least some branches of Buddhism developed a concept of an Absolute that strongly resembles ontological – not theological – descriptions of God as an ontologically real ground of being, unchanging and immutable, timeless, unaffected or unconditioned by anything other than Himself. In Tibetan Buddhism, for example, this view is represented by the Jo nang pa school which accepts the gzhan stong, or “other-empty” teaching according to which “emptiness” means a lack of extrinsically imposed qualities or defilements. (This view competes with the rang stong or “self-empty” tradition of the well known dGe lug school which sees “emptiness” as intrinsic emptiness, or a lack of qualities altogether.) Thus, for the Jo nang pa school, the Dharmakaya may still have attributes, but they are not dependent on or imposed by others. For this reason, the Dharmakaya is an ultimate reality, and Absolute, something which really, inherently exists. It is eternal, unchanging, an element which exists in all sentient beings and is the same, absolutely the same in obscuration and enlightenment.[85]

Here, too, we observe a more than passing resemblance to the ontological attributes of God. The only question arises regarding the Dharmakaya’s presence in all beings, but even this bears some similarity to the Writings’ reference to the names of God being present in each created thing.[86] In both cases, the Absolute is universally present, albeit in different ways.

The various teachings about the Dharmakaya effectively undermine any description of Buddhism as atheistic in any straightforward and unqualified way. Such a description may be used rhetorically to emphasise differences with religions which portray a God Who interferes directly in history and have human personalities. But in that case the conflict is not so much about the existence of God, or the Absolute or universal ground of being as it is about the image of God or the Absolute. Ontologically speaking, calling Buddhism as a whole atheistic is an unjustifiable overgeneralization

Suchness

Another term for the Absolute in Buddhist literature is “Suchness’ which in this case refers to

the nature of things and in this case, to the nature of the reality as a whole. Rather than more explicit description, 'Suchness' is used because, when discussing the nature of things we are at the limit of verbalization. This term helps overcome this inherent limitation of the mind. According to the great Buddhist classic, The Awakening of Faith,

The essence of Suchness is, from the beginningless beginning, endowed with the "perfect state of purity". It is provided with suprarational functions and the nature of manifesting itself (literally, the nature of making the world of object). Through the force of this permeation, it induces a man to loathe the suffering of samsara, to seek bliss in Nirvana and, believing that he has the principle of Suchness within him, to make up his mind to exert himself..... [87]

This passage makes it clear that Suchness is not subject to arising and ceasing – it is beginningless – , it has special mental powers and it manifests itself in the creation of the world., a concept not far removed from the Bahá'í teaching of creation by emanation. It also shows that in some way Suchness is effective in calling upon humans to abandon the painfully transitory world. Here, too, we see 'God-functions' in regards to being beyond time, having special epistemological capacities and a world creative function. This too suggests that judgments of Buddhism as atheistic are over-generalizations. All of these attributes are compatible with the Bahá'í concept of God. Asvaghosa also says,

From the beginning, Suchness in its nature is fully provided with all excellent qualities; namely, it is endowed with the light of great wisdom, the qualities of illuminating the entire universe, of true cognition and mind pure in its self-nature; of eternity, bliss, Self, and purity; of refreshing coolness, immutability, and freedom. It is endowed with these excellent qualities which outnumber the sands of the Ganges, which are not independent of, disjointed from, or different from the essence of Suchness, and which are suprarational attributes of Buddhahood. Since it is endowed completely with all these, and is not lacking anything, it is called the Tathagata-garbha when latent and also the Dharmakaya of the Tathagata.[88]

Asvaghosa assures us that "Suchness or the Dharmakaya is not empty, but is endowed with "excellent qualities" which Bahá'í s might understand as the divinely revealed Names of God. Again we note that many of these qualities are those that other religions associate with God or at least an Absolute of some kind. They are also the attributes of all Buddhas.

The Lankavatara Sutra goes much further than this:

When appearances and names are put away and all discrimination ceases, that which remains is the true and essential nature of things and, as nothing can be predicated as to the nature of essence, it is called the "Suchness" of Reality. This universal, undifferentiated, inscrutable, "Suchness" is the only Reality but it is variously characterised by Truth, Mind-essence, Transcendental Intelligence, Noble Wisdom, etc. This Dharma of the imagelessness of the Essence-nature of Ultimate Reality is the Dharma which has been proclaimed by all the Buddhas, and when all things are understood in full agreement with it, one is in possession of Perfect Knowledge, and is on his way to the attainment of the Transcendental Intelligence of the Tathagatas.[89]

This passage clearly shows that Suchness is the Ultimate Reality, which is “inscrutable”, that is unknowable to humankind and has been known to all Buddhas, or, as Bahá’ís would say, to all Manifestations, Who have by implication, all taught essentially the same thing. Thus, we find in this passage hints of the Bahá’í doctrine of progressive revelation. There is nothing here that conflicts with Bahá’í teachings about God.

Tathagatagarbha

Yet another ‘entity’ that is invested with God-like or Absolute-like qualities is the Tathagatagarbha which is often referred to as the Buddha-nature. According to The Tathagatagarbha Sutra, every sentient being has within it the real potential to liberate itself from the conditioned world and from its own defilements and to attain its Buddha-nature in other words, attain nirvana.[90] The Buddha says,

Yet I also see that within
The dust of ignorance of all beings,
The Tathagata nature [Buddha nature] sits motionless,
Great and indestructible.[91]

The Buddha then compares every sentient being to an “impoverished, vile, ugly [woman] hated by others who bears a noble son in her womb.”[92] For our purposes what is important about the Tathagatagarbha is that it is equivalent to Suchness and the Dharmakaya: “Since it [Suchness] is endowed completely with all these, and is not lacking anything, it [Suchness] is called the Tathagata-garbha when latent and also the Dharmakaya of the Tathagata.”[93] In other words, Suchness and Tathagatagarbha theory admit “the existence of something basic (dhatu) as the ground for all ephemeral phenomena.”[94] They refer to a ground of being, to some kind of noumenal reality all phenomena need in order to be whatever they are. As Queen Scrimala says, “Lord, samsara is based on the Tathagatagarbha.” And adds

Lord, the Tathagatagarbha is not born, does not die, does not pass away to become reborn. The Tathagatagarbha excludes the realm with the characteristic of the constructed. The Tathagatagarbha is permanent, steadfast, eternal. Therefore the Tathagatagarbha is the support, the holder, the base of constructed [Buddha natures] that are nondiscrete, not dissociated, and knowing as liberated from the stores [of defilement] . . . the Tathagatagarbha has ultimate existence without beginning or end, has an unborn and undying nature, and experiences suffering; hence it is worthy of the Tathagatagarbha to have aversion towards suffering as well as longing, eagerness, and aspiration towards Nirvana. [95]

Here it is evident that the Tathagatagarbha has been given a super-natural or transcendental personality, not to mention as function as the ground of being. As The Ratnagotravibhaga says of the Tathagatagarbha,

The Essence that exists since beginningless time
Is the foundation of all elements,
Owing to its existence, all Phenomenal Life (gati)
As well as the acquisition of Nirvana exists.[96]

In addition to the attributes that other religions assign to God, the Tathagatagarbha is also portrayed as having an ‘emotional life’, suffering, compassion, and longing like all other sentient beings. This is not at all unlike God as portrayed in Abrahamic religions and the Bahá’í Writings.

‘Absolutist’ Descriptions of the Buddha

The descriptions of the Buddha(s) is another way in which personal attributes of a supramundane or God-like being find their way into Buddhism. As we have already seen, “the Buddha in the Mahayana scriptures is not an ordinary human being walking in a sensuous world; he is altogether dissimilar.”[97] According to Paul Williams, “The Buddha was never simply a human being, and is not seen that way by any Buddhist tradition.”[98] The great Avatamsaka Sutra tells us that unlike all other phenomenal beings, “The Buddha’s body is formless, free from defilements [short-comings.]”[99] In a manner reminiscent of the God portrayed in the Abrahamic religions and the Bahá’í Faith, but unlike Theravada Buddhism, The Lotus Sutra for example, portrays the Buddha as a supernatural being whose life span is limitless and whose supernatural powers “are immeasurable, boundless, inconceivable.”[100] The Buddha then adds, “The Buddhas, saviors of the world abide in their great transcendental power.”[101] The Buddha points out that He can appear in various places and preach to humankind under various names, an idea that bears remarkable affinities to the Bahá’í doctrine of progressive revelation. He also says:

by an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana
but in truth I do not pass into extinction.
I am always here, preaching the Law [Dharma]
I am always here
through my transcendental power[102]

In other words his historical nirvana and historical death (mahaparinirvana) are simply appearances that lead us to salvation; moreover, like all other savior figures he is always present to help us. Indeed, later He says, “I am the father of this world,”[103] and, indeed, “the father of all living beings.”[104] Furthermore, other sutras[105] present the Buddha as a world-creating being whose worlds are variously called “Buddha fields,” “paradise” or “Buddha lands” by projecting them from His mind and becoming the teacher to those beings living in that world. In this case, we have here a portrait of the Buddha acting like the creator God of the Bahá’í Faith and the other Abrahamic religions.

The Alaya-vijnana or Mind

Although some authors favour a strictly epistemological or phenomenological interpretation of the Yogacara doctrine of Mind or Consciousness or Alaya-vijnana, others, D.T. Suzuki foremost among them, recognise that strong ontological aspects of these terms impel us to understand them as real entities.[106] In his introduction to The Lankavatara Sutra, D.T. Suzuki writes,

Our ordinary experience takes this world for something that has its "self-nature", i.e. existing by itself. [independently] But a higher intuition tells us that this is not so, that it is an illusion, and that what really exists is Mind, which being absolute knows no second. All that we see and hear and think of as objects of the vijnanas are what rise and disappear in and of the Mind-only. This absolute Mind is also called in The Lankavatara the Dharma of Solitude (vivikta-dharma), because it stands by itself. It also signifies the Dharma's being absolutely quiescent.[107]

The ontological language is unmistakable: the Mind "really exists," is "absolute" and is the ground on which all objects of thought appear. For example, The Lankavatara Sutra says,

if you say that there is no tathagata-garbha known as alayavijnana, there will be neither the rising nor the disappearing [of an external world of multiplicities] in the absence of the tathagata-garbha known as alayavijnana. [108]

Let us note in passing that the alaya-vijnana is here explicitly identified with the Tathagatagarbha which we have already seen is absolute. Here we see the alaya-vijnana functioning as a ground of being for the external world. The importance of the alaya-vijnana becomes apparent when we consider its other name: the store-house consciousness. As the deepest, most profound of the three levels of mind, the Alaya-vijnana or store-house consciousness gathers all the "seeds" of human actions (out of which still more seeds grow) which form the basis of karma. In other words, the world in which we find ourselves is conditioned by our own intentional karmic past. Furthermore, the Alaya-vijnana is often compared to an ocean and the phenomenal world of multiplicities are the waves tossed up by the winds of ignorance. (This is the ignorance of not knowing that the ocean and waves, all the multiplicities are one.) The Buddha says,

Like waves that rise on the ocean stirred by the wind, dancing and without interruption, The Alaya-ocean in a similar manner is constantly stirred by the winds of objectivity, and is seen dancing about with the Vijnanas which are the waves of multiplicity[109].

"The winds of objectivity" mentioned here are the winds of ignorance because, according to Yogacara philosophy, in objectivity we (mistakenly) think we are distinct from apparently other things; the vijnanas are the moments of consciousness. Each of them arises and then sinks back down into the sea, replenishing the alaya-vijnana with more karma 'seeds.' Here too we find a teaching that portrays the alaya-vijnana, like Consciousness or Mind, as the ground of being, as that from which everything arises and to which everything returns. Another image of this Universal Consciousness portrays it as an eternal, boundless 'stream of dharmas' or mind

continuum call *citta-santana*. “It is the sole substratum of the transmigration in *samsara*.”[110] Here, too, the apparently objective things of the multifarious world are simply temporary ‘waves’ that will return to their source and become one with the Universal Mind. However, we must not think that the ‘stream of dharmas’ or the *alaya-vijnana* is somehow unreal. As Richard King says:

it must be stressed that for the Yogacarin there is ‘something there’(viz. the paratantric flow) which constitutes the ‘raw material’ of our experience, although in the final analysis this is merely a fruition of seeds by past consciousness activity (*karman*).[111]

In other words, a real – albeit changing – substrate, an Absolute or ground of being, underlies the appearance of dharmas in at least one major interpretation of the Mahayana Yogacara philosophy. Here, too, we observe that although Buddhism does not recognise a distinct, personal creator God on Whom the existence of the world (however it may be conceived) depends, it has so to speak assigned many of this God’s functions to other entities, such as the *Tathagatagarbha* or the Buddhas with supernatural powers of creation and compassion. Thus, it seems inaccurate to say that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion since the Mahayana at least recognises an unconditioned Absolute and a ground of being that manifests Itself through the personality of the Buddha(s) as proclaimed by the Three Body (*trikaya*) doctrine.

Emptiness, Void, Sunyata

One of the most noteworthy consequences of dependent origination is the doctrine of emptiness, void, or *sunyata*. At this point a caveat is necessary: Buddhist schools do not all agree on the definition of emptiness. The Yogacara (mind or consciousness only) system “says that emptiness is the absence of a difference between an object and the mind apprehending it,”[112] that is, the subject. In a manner reminiscent of Hegel, Yogacaras believe enlightenment occurs when the subject realises that s/he is one with the object and his/her self disappears insofar as it is one with the universe. The Chinese Ch’an Buddhists (Zen in Japan) understood “emptiness as the radiant pure mind empty of all its conceptual accretions.”[113] This approach views all mental activities and the resulting concepts as obscurations of our natural inner radiance. The Bahá’í Writings cannot agree we can abolish the subject-object distinction, and, therefore, cannot accept the Yogacara definition of emptiness. However, with the Ch’an definition, matters become more nuanced. The Bahá’í Writings, do, after all, suggest that if we become like a hollow reed, if we empty ourselves of all traces of self and our acquired learning, we shall attain a higher, less worldly condition and more pure. Bahá’u’lláh says,

Blind thine eyes, that thou mayest behold My beauty; stop thine ears, that thou mayest hearken unto the sweet melody of My voice; empty thyself of all learning, that thou mayest partake of My knowledge; and sanctify thyself from riches, that thou mayest obtain a lasting share from the ocean of My eternal wealth. Blind thine eyes, that is, to all save My beauty; stop thine ears to all save My word; empty thyself of all learning save the knowledge of Me; that with a clear vision, a

pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness.[114]

In various ways, this whole section is about how to ‘empty’ ourselves in various ways, in order to attain a “clear vision” and a “pure heart.” This bears a remarkable similarity to the Ch’an notion of discovering “emptiness as the pure radiant mind.”[115]

The Madhyamika schools, such as Prasangika (Consequence) school say “that emptiness is the absence of inherent existence.”[116] They assert that because all things are dependently originated, they cannot exist by themselves and for that reason are ‘empty’ of real or true being. In the last analysis, “all things lack own-existence.”[117] Indeed, anything that results from a causal process is, for that very reason, dependent on others and has only relative existence, for which reason it is empty. “The Mahaayaana understands it [emptiness] to mean that dharmas are empty of own-being i.e. they are not ultimate facts in their own right, but merely imagined and falsely discriminated for each and every one of them is dependent on something other than itself.”[118] As The Heart Sutra says, the Bodhisattva Avalokita “looked down from on high . . . and he saw that in their own being they [all things] were empty.”[119] Such a view effectively equates relative existence with dependent origination and emptiness. In the words of Nagarjuna,

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.[120]

According to The Lotus Sutra,

All phenomena
empty, without being,
without any constant abiding,
without arising or extinction

Look upon all phenomena
as having no existence,
like empty space
as without firmness or hardness,
not born, not emerging[121]

The Bahá’í Writings are well able to accommodate the Madhyamaka views on emptiness for as `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

In the same manner the existence of beings in comparison with the existence of God is but illusion and nothingness; it is an appearance, like the image reflected in a mirror.[122]

This means that, like the Dharmakaya, or the Alaya-vijnana, only God is absolute, which is to say, unconditioned existence and compared to that absolute existence all other existence is dependent, relative and, therefore, empty. They are not only dependent on God but, as we have shown above, also on the influence of other things in dependent origination. [123] `Abdu'l-Bahá emphasises this relativity by saying,

Therefore, though the world of contingency exists, in relation to the existence of God it is nonexistent and nothingness. Man and dust both exist, but how great the difference between the existence of the mineral and that of man! The one in relation to the other is nonexistence. In the same way, the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence. Thus it is evident and clear that although the beings exist, in relation to God and to the Word of God they are nonexistent.[124]

In other words, “existence and nonexistence are both relative.”[125] All things are non-existent compared to the unconditioned Absolute, and, therefore, empty. (Unlike Buddhism, we also see how this principle applies to various levels of existence, insofar as a lower form of existence is non-existent to a higher form, a teaching which further emphasises the relativity of existence.)

One may, of course, ask whether ‘emptiness’ and ‘non-existence’ as used in the Bahá’í Writings are the same. The answer is positive, because both terms refer to the relativity of existence of all entities, and because in both cases relativity implies a conditioned, dependent existence that contrasts sharply with the unconditioned existence of an Absolute. In other words, Buddhism as well as the Bahá’í Faith postulate that the relativity of existence is grounded not just in phenomenal impermanence but also in the mutual inter-dependent influences of things on each other. The Bahá’í Faith and some Mahayana schools can agree as well that phenomenal reality is relative in comparison to a non-relative Absolute (such as the Dharmakaya, or Tathagatagarbha) that is not affected by dependent origination.

However, we are still left with the question of whether or not the Bahá’í Writings can agree that relativity and emptiness mean that there is no “arising or extinction” of things as asserted by The Lotus Sutra. This is not, of course, a conventional truth, but rather a statement from the ultimate point of view. In the Bahá’í Writings, the ultimate point of view is God’s perspective, and according to `Abdu'l-Bahá, “in the world of God there is no time.”[126] If there is no time, there is neither “arising or extinction” which are temporal phenomena. This means that Bahá’í ontology agrees with the Mahayana that from the ultimate viewpoint, there are no temporal phenomena, but they disagree that human beings can attain that ultimate viewpoint.

It is important to note that the Yogacara school, differs from the Madhyamika in that it:

does not define ‘emptiness’ as a lack of essence (permanent, immutable and beyond dependent origination) but rather as the over-coming of the subject-object dichotomy in human perception.[127] For Vasubandhu, one of the founders of the Yogacara, emptiness is the “existence of the nonexistence”[128] of the subject-object duality. Emptiness is also the absence of the humanly constructed or imputed character imposed on things – an absence that allows perception of things as they actually are without an obstructions. This new definition of

emptiness is significant because it allows Vasubandhu to establish his doctrine of the three natures according to which “every object of experience is characterized by three distinct but interdependent natures.”[129] Thus, all things are given three distinct natures by Vasubandhu.[130]

The Trikaya and the Bahá’í Concept of Manifestations

One of the fundamental issues in the Bahá’í Writings is the ontology of the Manifestations Who have two stations:

One of these stations, the station of essential unity, We have already explained. "No distinction do We make between any of them." The other is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated limitations.[131]

To what extent can this teaching accommodate the Buddhist trikaya doctrine? This doctrine, as we recall, says the Buddha has three ‘bodies’, the Buddha’s nirmankaya or historical, earthly body; his sambhogakaya in which the Buddha appears in the infinite Buddha-lands and in our conceptions of Him and the Dharmakaya or the transcendent ultimate truth, the “indestructible essence of Buddhahood.”[132] The fact that it is “indestructible” means that it is not subject to dependent origination, is unconditioned and is, therefore, absolutely real. “Dharmakaya . . . signifies that which constitutes the ultimate foundation of existence, one great whole in which all forms of individuation are obliterated, in a word, the Absolute.”[133]

To what extent can the Bahá’í Writings accommodate the trikaya doctrine? In such a comparison, the Dharmakaya as the Absolute, the ground of all being or God in His ontological function, obviously functions as the counterpart of God on Whom everything else depends but Who depends on nothing else. As we have observed above, the Dharmakaya is the uncreated, pure, unconditioned unchanging foundation necessary to the existence of everything else. In other words, like God, the Dharmakaya is omnipresent, and by logical extension, omniscient though utterly transcendent. In the words of the Bahá’í Writings, “No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it.”[134] The Dharmakaya is also endowed with all good attributes[135] (it is not empty) and “universally responds to the spiritual needs of all sentient beings in all times and in all places. . .”[136] The Dharmakaya, like God, is also compassionate and fulfills our needs, though not always in the ways we expect or would like. Ultimately, “the dharmakaya is free from all intellectual constructs and is in fact inconceivable,”[137] a belief that corresponds perfectly with the Bahá’í belief in the essential unknowability of God. Although some scholars assert the absence of any transcendental or divine entity at all in Buddhism, no less a scholar than D.T. Suzuki speaks directly of “God or the religious object of Buddhism.[138] and states that

Buddhism must not be judged as an atheism which endorses an agnostic, materialistic interpretation of the universe. Far from it. Buddhism outspokenly acknowledges the presence in the world of a reality which transcends the limitations of phenomenality but which is nevertheless immanent everywhere . . .[139]

Suzuki's intellectual convictions about God in Buddhism are so strong that he sees even the Madhyamaka who claim to reject all positive statements about ontology as a form of "pantheism." [140]

Moreover, there is a clear similarity between the Buddhist concept of *nirmankaya* (*rupakaya*), that is, the Buddha's body appearing in time and space and the Bahá'í concept of the second, human station of the Manifestation in which the Manifestation appears like any other human being and suffers the vicissitudes of existence. Bahá'u'lláh refers to this as "the station of distinction, [which] pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof." [141] In this station, all the various Buddhas or Manifestations are different since they appear in various places and differing sociological, economic and cultural circumstances. According to Bahá'í teaching, when we speak of different Manifestations such as Buddha or Bahá'u'lláh, we are viewing Them in Their "station of distinction." [142] It is through this station that beings of the phenomenal world come to know God.

However, we must be sure to dissociate Bahá'í concepts from any suggestion that the Manifestation is an incarnation of God as suggested by TRV Murti in his claim that the *nirmankaya* of the Buddha "is a deliberate descent of the Divinity, incarnating Itself as human being." [143] Under no circumstances do the Bahá'í Writings accept the notion that God Himself, in His Essence, appears as a phenomenal being. (That said, we hasten to add that it is not clear how literally Murti meant us to take the word "incarnation," since he also describes the Buddha as an "emanation of the Absolute" [144] – that being a concept incompatible with incarnation.) What is clear, however, is that both the Bahá'í Writings and Buddhism share a theology in which the Absolute, be it called God or the *Dharmakaya*, is revealed – to the limits allowed by human capacity – by a being that manifests Its powers in the various phenomenal worlds.

The king of the Dharma peacefully abides in the Dharma Mansion, the light of the *dharmakāya* illuminates all.... The *dharmakāya* of the Tathāgata is equal to the *dharmadhātu* [cosmos] and manifests itself according to the inclinations of sentient beings for their specific needs. The Tathāgata, the king of the Dharma, liberates sentient beings by taming them according to the law of righteousness. [145]

On the subject of the *samboghakaya*, the subject of congruencies between Buddhism and the Bahá'í Writings becomes more difficult because, among other things, the *samboghakaya* itself has been characterised so differently by various writers. For example, some characterise it as the 'body' or condition produced by the Buddha's merit, [146] others assert that "there must in the infinite universe, be buddhas now teaching in their pure lands and Buddha fields" [147] each appearing in Their own *samboghakayas* in a way appropriate to that world. We can access these Buddhas through meditation and thus our images of the Buddha are also manifestations of His *samboghakaya* or His transcendental "Body of Enjoyment [bliss]." [148] In this body, which possesses the thirty-two major marks of a Buddha, the Buddha also preaches to the infinite number of *bodhisattvas* in their Buddha-lands or 'heavens.'

In the Bahá'í Writings, there is no formal concept that directly corresponds to the *samboghakaya*, although there is a concept that bears a certain resemblance to it. According to the Writings, all

believers (and cultures) have their own image of God and the Manifestation, images to which they are entitled and which do no harm as long as they do not try to impose them on others and realise these are man-made images, valid for ourselves alone and mere devices to aid spiritual growth. They are not ontological realities. In other words, they are simply examples of what the Buddha calls “skilful means,”[149] fictional heuristic devices that facilitate the discovery of truth. According to the Writings, if we confuse the image with the reality to which it refers, then we have fallen prey to “vain imaginings”[150] which will become like a “veil that interveneth between man and the recognition of the Lord, his God.”[151] Moreover, unlike the samboghakaya in Mahayana Buddhism, these personal and cultural images have no transcendental aspect or function; they do not exist or function in a separate ontological realm.

Buddhism does not seem to possess a formal notion of what the Bahá’í Writings call “the station of pure abstraction and essential unity”[152] in which all the Manifestations are one. This is not to say that Buddhism does not recognise that all of the many Buddhas are essentially one; the Avatamsaka Sutra says, “ ‘The Buddhas of the past, present and future are but one dharmakaya.’ ”[153] The same sutra, one of the most important in Buddhism, also says, “ ‘It should be known that all Buddhas are but one dharmakaya.’ ”[154] Thus, it would seem that Buddhism recognises the concept of what the Bahá’í Writings call the station of “essential unity” without possessing a formal notion of that concept.

However, does the Buddha have an ontological station distinct from the Dharmakaya, from “the ultimate foundation of existence”[155] or “the impersonal principle of the universe and ontologically the foundation and support of everything.”[156]? Is He, like Bahá’í Manifestations, one of those “Primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory”[157] Who is nevertheless distinct from God, or is He an incarnation of the transcendental Dharmakaya, ‘descended’ into phenomenal form? Both in the Bahá’í concept and in incarnationism, the Transcendent is immanent albeit in different ways: with incarnation the transcendent Dharmakaya is immanent Itself, in Its own essence, whereas in the case of reflection the transcendent God is ‘immanent’ only as an image, that is, as an imitation of an original which is identical in form but distinct in essence. According to David J Kalupahana, “Siddattha Gotama was no other than the representation of Buddhahood.”[158] Given this statement about the Buddha being a representation, an incarnationist view in which the Buddha and the Dharmakaya are ontologically one seems unlikely. As a “representation,” He is not the Dharmakaya Itself in Its inmost nature but rather something different – though He is not merely a human being either. This description of the Buddha as a “representation” is reminiscent of the Bahá’í concept of the Manifestation as a “Primal Mirror” since both concepts suggest an ontological distinction between the Transcendent and the “representative” or “Primal Mirror.”

However, this still leaves the question of whether or not the Buddha is ontologically distinct from ordinary human beings. Here is a fundamental difference between the Theravada and the Mahayana; the former tends to portray the Buddha as a human being like any other while the latter places emphasis on the Buddha’s superhuman qualities.[159] Certainly in His nirmankaya aspect He was like all other human beings and subject to anicca or impermanence (although some schools say this is true in appearance only), but His eternal existence as described in the Lotus Sutra and His special powers – described in dramatic detail in many Mahayana sutras – leave no doubt that the Buddha was more than a simple, ordinary human being, ontologically

identical to us. This idea is reinforced by the Buddha's statement that he is not a god, not a man, not a gandharva (low ranking deva) but rather a Buddha,[160], thereby indicating His ontologically distinct nature. For their part, the Bahá'í Writings make it clear that Manifestations are not simply ordinary human beings. Bahá'u'lláh states,

And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. Unto this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being He hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God Himself.[161]

Manifestations are certainly not to be identified with God but neither are They like ordinary humanity, as the foregoing description makes clear. They are "born of the substance of God Himself," which is to say, They somehow (we cannot say exactly how) reflect God's substance or essence. As `Abdu'l-Bahá says, "They are the "Universal Realities and the Divine Beings, Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God." [162] This why Bahá'u'lláh calls them the "primal Mirrors." [163] They also possess omniscience and "essential infallibility." [164] Thus it would appear that at least in the Mahayana that Buddhism and the Bahá'í Writings agree that Buddhas or Manifestations are ontologically distinct from the rest of humanity.

Emptiness, Void, Sunyata

Another noteworthy consequence of dependent origination is the doctrine of emptiness, void, or sunyata. However, an important caveat is necessary: Buddhist schools do not all agree on the definition of emptiness. The Yogacara (mind or consciousness only) system "says that emptiness is the absence of a difference between an object and the mind apprehending it," [165] that is, the subject. In a manner reminiscent of Hegel, Yogacaras believe enlightenment occurs when the subject realises that s/he is one with the object and his/her self disappears insofar as it is one with the universe. The Chinese Ch'an Buddhists (Zen in Japan), on the other hand, understands "emptiness as the radiant pure mind empty of all its conceptual accretions." [166] This approach views all mental activities and the resulting concepts as obscurations of our natural inner radiance. The Scrimala Sutra, for its part, defines 'emptiness' as the cleansing from of "all the defilement-stores by inconceivable void-ness knowledge. The ultimate knowledge, which disintegrates the entire defilement-store, is entitled 'Right Knowledge.'" [167] The Buddha is also empty of defilement ("other-empty") but "is not void of the Buddha dharmas" [168] i.e. He has real, positive essential being and attributes, i.e. is not "self-empty." The Ratnagotravibhaga Sutra makes similar claims. Finally, in Tibet the Jo nang pas (gzhan stong) school, which is a rival to the dGe lugpa (rang stong) school to which the Dalai Lama belongs, also sees emptiness as the absence of defilements and the existence of an Absolute which "is not empty of its own inherent existence." [169] Indeed, "the self-empty teachings are said by the Jo nang pas to be correct as far as reasoning goes, as a lower teaching, clearing away erroneous views." [170] For them, emptiness is not the lack of real inherent existence but rather the lack of defilements by the real self.

As we have already noted, the Bahá'í Writings cannot agree we can abolish the subject-object distinction, and, therefore, cannot accept the Yogacara definition of emptiness. However, with the Ch'an definition, matters become more nuanced. The Bahá'í Writings, do, after all, suggest that if we become like a hollow reed, if we empty ourselves of all traces of our lower nature or defilements as well as our acquired learning, we shall attain a higher, less worldly condition and more pure. Bahá'u'lláh says,

Blind thine eyes, that thou mayest behold My beauty; stop thine ears, that thou mayest hearken unto the sweet melody of My voice; empty thyself of all learning, that thou mayest partake of My knowledge; and sanctify thyself from riches, that thou mayest obtain a lasting share from the ocean of My eternal wealth. Blind thine eyes, that is, to all save My beauty; stop thine ears to all save My word; empty thyself of all learning save the knowledge of Me; that with a clear vision, a pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness.[171]

In various ways, this whole section is about how to 'empty' ourselves of our lower nature defilements, in order to attain a "clear vision" and a "pure heart." This bears a remarkable similarity to the Ch'an notion of discovering "emptiness as the pure radiant mind"[172] as well as to the Tathagtagarbha sutras such as Queen Srimala and the Ratnagotravibhaga.

However, the best known concept of emptiness – at least in the West – is that of the Madhyamika schools, such as Prasangika (Consequence) school which assert "that emptiness is the absence of inherent existence." [173] They assert that because all things are dependently originated, they cannot exist by themselves and for that reason are 'empty' of real or true being. In the last analysis, "all things lack own-existence." [174] Indeed, anything that results from a causal process is, for that very reason, dependent on others and has only relative existence, for which reason it is empty. "The Mahaayaana understands it [emptiness] to mean that dharmas are empty of own-being i.e. they are not ultimate facts in their own right, but merely imagined and falsely discriminated for each and every one of them is dependent on something other than itself." [175] As The Heart Sutra says, the Bodhisattva Avalokita "looked down from on high . . . and he saw that in their own being they [all things] were empty." [176] Such a view effectively equates relative existence with dependent origination and emptiness. In the words of Nagarjuna,

Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.[177]

According to The Lotus Sutra,

All phenomena

are empty, without being,
without any constant abiding,
without arising or extinction

Look upon all phenomena
as having no existence,
like empty space
as without firmness or hardness,
not born, not emerging[178]

The Bahá'í Writings are well able to accommodate the Madhyamaka view that all phenomena lack inherent existence, are contingent and in that sense, empty – though they do not refer to that fact as a lack of essence. `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

In the same manner the existence of beings in comparison with the existence of God is but illusion and nothingness; it is an appearance, like the image reflected in a mirror.[179]

This means that, like the Dharmakaya, or the Alaya-vijnana, only God has absolute, which is to say, unconditioned existence and compared to that absolute existence all other existence is dependent, relative and, therefore, empty. They are not only dependent on God but, as we have shown above, also on the influence of other things in dependent origination. [180] `Abdu'l-Bahá emphasises this relativity by saying,

Therefore, though the world of contingency exists, in relation to the existence of God it is nonexistent and nothingness. Man and dust both exist, but how great the difference between the existence of the mineral and that of man! The one in relation to the other is nonexistence. In the same way, the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence. Thus it is evident and clear that although the beings exist, in relation to God and to the Word of God they are nonexistent.[181]

In other words, “existence and nonexistence are both relative.”[182] All things are non-existent compared to the unconditioned Absolute, and, therefore, empty. (Unlike Buddhism, we also see how this principle applies to various levels of existence, insofar as a lower form of existence is non-existent to a higher form, a teaching which further emphasises the relativity of existence.)

One may, of course, ask whether ‘emptiness’ and ‘non-existence’ as used in the Bahá'í Writings are the same. The answer is positive, because both terms refer to the relativity of existence of all

entities, and because in both cases relativity implies a conditioned, dependent, contingent existence that contrasts sharply with the unconditioned existence of an Absolute. In other words, Buddhism as well as the Bahá'í Faith postulate that the relativity of existence is grounded not just in universal impermanence and contingency but also in the mutual inter-dependent influences of things on each other. The Bahá'í Faith and some Mahayana schools can agree as well that phenomenal reality is contingent, unlike the non-relative Absolute (such as the Dharmakaya, or Tathagatagarbha) that is not affected by dependent origination.

However, we are still left with the question of whether or not the Bahá'í Writings can agree that relativity and emptiness mean that there is no "arising or extinction" of things as asserted by The Lotus Sutra. This is not, of course, a conventional truth, but rather a statement from the ultimate point of view. In the Bahá'í Writings, the ultimate point of view is God's perspective, and according to `Abdu'l-Bahá, "in the world of God there is no time." [183] If there is no time, there is neither "arising or extinction" which are temporal phenomena. This means that Bahá'í ontology agrees with the Mahayana that from the ultimate viewpoint, there are no temporal phenomena, but they disagree that human beings can attain that ultimate viewpoint.

In regards to human nature, emptiness usually refers to the doctrine of anatman, anatta) or 'no self', a doctrine which is understood differently in different Buddhist schools. Complicating the issue is the fact that in the Pali Canon, the Buddha declines to answer whether He preaches self or no-self, and later He said that both views were mistaken extremes:

"Self" (aatma), Kaa`syapa. is one extreme. "No-self" (nairaatmya) is the second extreme. In between these two extremes is the middle position that is formless, nonindicative, supportless, noumenal, signless and nonconceptual. This, Kaa`syapa, is called the middle path, the correct perception of things. [184]

Elsewhere, He provides a list of all the things the self is not and cannot be – without explicitly denying that the self exists perhaps in some other way. [185] According to one scholar, the no-self doctrine is not an ontological doctrine about the existence or non-existence of a 'self' but rather a strategy for overcoming suffering by detaching ourselves from the 'self', which is a major cause of suffering. [186] Furthermore, the important Tathagatagarbha sutras categorically assert that contrary to the most commonly presented view of the no-self doctrine, there is, in fact, a transcendent and enduring ground of being, i.e. the Buddha-nature, in every sentient being. However, the Theravada, Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka and the Prasangika school would deny this without qualification. In the aggregate of dharmas that make up a human being, there is no dharma corresponding to a 'self.' The 'self' is a delusion, an artefact of dependent origination and non-existent. A significant portion of Buddhist practice is to attain such realization of no self. As the Buddha says in one of the suttas [sutras] from the Pali Canon:

If one does not behold any self or anything of the nature of self in the five groups of grasping (material shape, feeling, perception, the impulses, consciousness), one is an Arahant [a worthy one, a pure one, free of mental defilements]. [187]

This theme has one of its best known and oft-repeated expressions in The Questions of King Milinda (the historical Bactrian Greek, Menander, 100 BCE). Nagasena, a travelling Buddhist monk, tells Milinda that he is called merely Nagasena, that “there is no permanent individuality [soul] in the matter!”[188] Our names are conventional, nominal designations, “mere empty sound”[189] and refer to nothing more than a current composition of parts. He then uses a chariot as an example, pointing out that no individual part is ‘the chariot’ and that when he has broken the chariot down, no thing called ‘chariot’ remains. The same is true of human beings because the existence of an ego-soul cannot be conceived apart from sensation, perception, imagination, intelligence, volition etc. and therefore it is absurd to think that there is an independent individual soul-agent which makes our consciousness its workshop.[190]

There is no special independent being which ‘composes’ these elements according to a desired form or which uses them to achieve its own ends. As Richard Taylor says, “The self whose existence the Buddha denied was an inner, enduring self, having an identity through time and presumably being, therefore, capable of an existence independent of the body and the world even after death.”[191]

Conceived in this unqualified manner, there is no common ground between Buddhism and the Bahá’í Writings on the issue of the self. The Bahá’í scriptures leave no doubt that the soul or self (we shall use the terms interchangeably here.) is more than just a name, or a sound but is an ontologically real being, “in its essence one of the signs of God.”[192] Indeed, the underlying essentialist philosophy of the Writings, illustrated by their insistence on essential nature of the mineral, vegetable, animal and human,[193] on the essence of man[194] and even on the “Essence of God,”[195] makes it clear that Bahá’í essentialism and a purely nominalist understandings of self are logically incompatible.

The purely nominalist understanding of self is not trouble free from the standpoint of Buddhist sutras and major philosophical works. For example, a whole class of sutras – that is, Buddha word – called the Tathagarbha sutras reject this explanation. For example, in the Tathagarbha Sutra itself the Buddha says, “Good sons, all beings, though they find themselves

with all sorts of klesas [defilements], have a tathagatagarbha [Buddha nature or Buddha essence] that is eternally unsullied, and that is replete with virtues no different from my own[196] and adds, “the tathagatagarbhas of all beings are eternal and unchanging.”[197] This concept of the tathagatagarbha is so close to a substantial self (see David Kalupahana below) that the Mahaparinirvana Sutra directly identifies it with self or atman.[198] In the twelfth chapter on Buddha-nature, we read, “The Buddha said: "O good man! 'Self' means 'tathagatagarbha.' Every being has the Buddha Nature. This is self. Such a self is, since the very beginning, under cover of innumerable illusions.”[199] According to the Buddha, “The true self of the Buddha Nature is like the diamond which cannot be crushed out,” and “The shape of self that seeks to flee from the world is the Buddha Nature. It is the best way of conceiving self.”[200] These words suggest that the doctrine of anatman in fact denies a superficial ‘ego-self’ that is absorbed in the affairs of the world; it does not necessarily deny the existence of a deep Buddha-nature or tathagatagarbha within the individual. As Paul Williams says, “One thing anyway is clear: the Mahaparinirvana Sutra teaches a really existing, permanent element . . . in sentient beings.”[201] The Lion’s Roar of Queen Srimala Sutra supports this statement as does Asvaghosha’s “The Awakening of Faith in Mahayana” which states that “The Mind as phenomena (samsara) is grounded on the Tathagata-garbha.”[202] This means that the phenomenal mind of man is fundamentally the Tathagatagarbha or Buddha-essence. The importance of tathagatagarbha or Buddha essence theory in East Asian , i.e. Chinese, Japanese and Korean Buddhism cannot be underestimated according to Paul Williams.[203]

The Tathagatagarbha doctrine is more easily reconciled with the Bahá’í Writings than the Theravada, Prasangika or Madhyamaka views. As already noted, the Bahá’í Writings teach that the soul or self is an ontologically existing entity although its existence is dependent upon God. Bahá’ís, too, believe that the soul is eternal once it has come into existence[204] and that in itself it is free from all bodily defects, defilements (klesas) and limitations.

Consider how the human intellect develops and weakens, and may at times come to naught, whereas the soul changeth not . . . the soul dependeth not upon the body. It is through the power of the soul that the mind comprehendeth, imagineth and exerteth its influence, whilst the soul is a power that is free . . .the soul [is] limitless . . . The soul . . . is in motion and ever active . . . is ever endowed with full strength . . . despite the loss of reason, the power of the soul would still continue to exist.[205]

Like the Tathagatagarbha Sutras, the Bahá’í Writings assert that the real self , i.e. the ontological foundation of our being, is originally pure: “Know thou that every soul is fashioned after the nature of God, each being pure and holy at his birth.”[206] The ontological foundation of the self

, be it called Buddha-nature or Buddha-essence or 'soul', is, in its nature pristine and perfect, and is only adventitiously covered by klesas or defilements. This 'second self', or empirical ego of our own making, which is attached to the world is precisely what must be overcome to attain our true nature again. "Our greatest efforts must be directed towards detachment from the things of the world; we must strive to become more spiritual, more luminous . . ."[207] Similarly, we must detach from our empirical, worldly self: "The martyr's field is the place of detachment from self. . ."[208] Only when we accomplish this will we once more be aware of the original and inherent nobility of our spiritual nature: "13. O SON OF SPIRIT! . . . Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself?"[209]

The Bhavanga and the Alaya

The Theravada Buddhists and the Yogacara (Cittamara) branch of the Madhyamaka realised that a strict interpretation of the no-self (anatman) doctrine leads to serious philosophical difficulties. This, is partly due to the fact that "what the Buddha says concerning the absence of self seems to conflict with other things he says and is not obviously a cogent account of our experience." [210] Several of these problems relate to the karmic sequence of cause and effect that is conventionally called a person. What makes any such sequence a particular sequence, identifiably different from others? What keeps the continuity of that particular sequence so that it does not simply fragment into a disorderly chaos? What is it that links the karmic results of one life with the next? Furthermore, how can there be continuous consciousness if the mind is only a series of moments without factors of continuity between moments? To answer these questions, Theravada Buddhism developed the concept of bhavanga, which is "usually translated as 'life-continuum' [which] keeps the continuity in a lifespan, so that what we call a 'being' goes on to live from moment to moment." [211] It is necessary for continued existence." According to Alfred Scheepers, "This background consciousness can be compared to a river" [212] whose flow is interrupted by moments of focussed consciousness. For that reason, under normal waking circumstances, the mind is not aware of the bhavanga stream, although it may be during sleep. In the Yogacara (Cittamara) school of the Mahayana, the function of the bhavanga is fulfilled by the alaya-vijnana from which conscious volition and karma arise and where the potential karmic consequences are stored. Indeed, for this reason, the Yogacara tradition referred to the alaya-vijnana, as the "storehouse consciousness" [213] which stores the individual seeds of one's karmic sequence and thus provides continuity as they manifest in turn.

The alaya consists of a series of cittas [minds] accompanied by both karmic seeds and the 'seeds' of potential defilements and memories. These all reproduce themselves over time, thus accounting for the continuity of personality through and periods of unconsciousness . . . [214]

According to Paul Williams, "The substratum consciousness [alaya], seen as a defiled form of consciousness . . . is personal in a sense, individual, continually changing and yet serving to give a degree of personal identity . . ." [215]

David Kalupahana informs us that the alaya is often portrayed as the ocean agitated by the “dispositional tendencies,”[216] which is to say the karmic seeds of individual consciousness. However, whether it be the image of a river or an ocean, the images of the bhavanga and the alaya remains one of a substratum or ground of being that supports the existence of something else, be it ever so briefly, and ensures their continuity. Though in a different way, the Tathagatgarbha also “bears a close resemblance to the bhavanga”[217] insofar as it provides a ground of being for all individual existence. As such it provides for their continuity as well.

There is no question that, as Kalupahana says, the teaching of alaya – and even bhavanga and Tathagatagarbha – brings us “dangerously close to the theory of self . . . advocated by the heretics.”[218] After all, a “life-continuum” acts very much like a continuously existing entity as the karmic seeds are stored and reproduce themselves through their consequences. Williams notes that although the alaya or substratum consciousness “performs some of the functions of a Self,”[219] the Yogacara struggled hard to deny this charge and to explain it away. Fully aware of this, Kalupahana presents ways of interpreting the relevant sutras to avoid this outcome, but the fact remains that for Buddhism, there is no problem-free way of accepting the concept of underlying continuity – which resembles ‘substance’ precisely insofar as it provides continuity. Providing and explaining continuity is one of substance’s chief ontological functions and whenever we have continuity we do have, in fact, something that is at least substance-like. Thus, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at least some forms of Buddhism harbour concepts that look and/or function suspiciously like a substantial self.

Insofar as the bhavanga and alaya function like substances by providing continuity, they are convergent with the Bahá’í concept of soul/self. This is because the Bahá’í Writings accept the continuous existence of the soul from birth right into our post-earthly existence. That continuity is, after all, the basis of our moral responsibility for the actions we commit, and their formative influence on our character. We cannot simply deny this continuity and slough off responsibility as if our deeds had been done by someone else at another time. The bhavanga ensures this will not happen because it provides continuity, that is, it allows the regular appearance of certain attributes that identify things through time.

Dependent Origination, Karma and Re-incarnation

The issue of self in Buddhist thought brings us to the subject of dependent origination, karma, and re-incarnation. Applied to karma and re-incarnation, dependent origination explains the origin and causes of suffering and subsequent re-birth if these causes are not overcome during our lives. The twelve stage process of dependent origination and reincarnation starts with

ignorance which leads to “volitional impulses”[220] (which the Buddha equates with action[221]) from which we get consciousness, from which we get body and mind, from which the six senses, from which contact with other things, from which feeling, from which craving or desire, from which grasping or clinging, from which becoming from which birth from which aging, death, grief and despair.[222] The only way not to condemn oneself to the last, twelfth step of despair, and to avoid rebirth is not to begin in the first place because the underlying principle is that when this arises, that arises and when this ceases, that ceases.[223] For the Buddhist, the whole purpose in studying reality is not an epistemological satisfaction of knowing but soteriological satisfaction of ending the ignorance that leads to a new karmic sequence and inevitable rebirth. The Buddha makes this plain in the parable of the man wounded by an arrow; no one would waste time speculating about the origin or construction of the tip instead of removing it from the flesh.

However, a problem remains: how can there be re-birth if there is no substantial soul or self to be re-born? According to Walpola Rahula, when the body perishes, the energies which constituted that body “have within themselves the power to grow a new form”[224] i.e. be re-born in a new particular aggregate of energies. No self or soul has moved from one life to another. As Rupert Gethin says, “there is a causal connection between the phenomenon that constitute a being at the time of death and the phenomenon that constitute a being at the start of a new life.”[225] Lives are linked in a causal series. Keeping the causal connection in mind prevents what could become a serious misunderstanding for Bahá’ís who may confuse this concept of re-incarnation with the Bahá’í concept of the return of the qualities of a previously existing person.

Briefly, a return is indeed referred to in the Holy Scriptures, but by this is meant the return of the qualities, conditions, effects, perfections, and inner realities of the lights which recur in every dispensation. The reference is not to specific, individual souls and identities.[226]

In other words, the qualities return but there is no causal connection between the first person in whom these qualities appear, and the next. The resemblance between the two is coincidental, and, therefore, the Bahá’í Writings cannot be interpreted as supporting re-incarnation on this basis. Nor do they accept re-incarnation in the form of a theory of transmigration in which a substantial soul or self re-appears in various guises in various places and times. Such a return to earth is vigorously rejected by `Abdu'l-Bahá.’ in Some Answered Questions in which he devotes an entire chapter to refuting this idea.[227]

This brings us to the crucial question: of whether the Bahá'í Writings can accommodate this application of the law of dependent origination? On at least one important matter, they can, namely, both Buddhism and the Bahá'í Writings see ignorance as the root cause of our psychological and spiritual difficulties. That is why the Noonday Prayer is – in Buddhist terms – a statement about correct knowledge and correct action, the first two terms in the Law of Conditionality: “I bear witness O my God that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.” In knowing God, we overcome the ignorance that prevents us from living correctly and in worshipping God, which is what the Buddha calls taking “right action.” Moreover, given the frequent admonitions about detachment the Bahá'í Writings also agree with Buddhism about the devastating consequences of craving, desire and grasping.

This still leaves the question of how Bahá'ís could understand and reinterpret reincarnation from a Bahá'í perspective. Obviously, they cannot accept the view that a specific individual returns for another round of earthly life since this is precisely a position that `Abdu'l-Bahá firmly rejects in *Some Answered Questions*. [228] Moreover, as shown above, the concept of qualities returning cannot be accepted as reincarnation because there is no causal connection between the person who once possessed the qualities and the next person to possess them. There is only a repetition of qualities. [229] One possible way to interpret reincarnation through a Bahá'í lens is to view it as a psycho-spiritual process in which ignorance and grasping lead to re-birth in the sense of re-attachment to the phenomenal world or to the phenomenal body. When we momentarily overcome these attachments we attain freedom from all the suffering caused by attachment and grasping, and freedom of a true spiritual existence. By rekindling or falling into our attachments again, we pass “from the world of freedom into the world of bondage.” [230] To put it another way, a psychological or spiritual interpretation of reincarnation refers to the on-going process of detaching ourselves from the world or falling back into attachment, which is to say, being ‘re-born’, and struggling to detach ourselves again. The great goal, of course, is not to fall back into the re-birth of attachment and grasping and to remain in the condition of freedom. Reinterpreting reincarnation in this way, as a psycho-spiritual process we undergo in daily life, makes it possible for Bahá'ís to accept this version of re-incarnation which does not conflict with the Writings. [231]

The reinterpretation of reincarnation as a psycho-spiritual process in daily life is not without parallels in Buddhist texts. According to P.A. Payutto, in the *Abhidharama Pitaka*, one of the “three baskets” of the Theravada, presents this very idea in which dependent origination is shown occurring in its entirety in one mind moment . . . It is not necessary to die before realizing the cessation of birth, aging, death and thus sorrow lamentation, pain grief and despair. Those things can be overcome in this very life-time. [232]

Walpola Rahula also leads us in this direction when he quotes the Buddha as saying:

“O bhikku, every moment you are born, decay and die.”[233] In other words, the process of karma (which is based on dependent origination) can happen within a single life as described above, and need not be a “life-time-to lifetime process”[234] as is commonly assumed. With specific references to original texts and commentaries, Payutto shows how the ‘one-life-time’ understanding of reincarnation is based directly on the Pali Canon, although, as he points out, in modern times, this view has not been prevalent. This revived ‘one-life-time’ interpretation retains the usual 12-stage process that begins with ignorance and ends with despair but understands it as happening within our life-time and not between successive life-times. Viewed psychologically or spiritually rather than ontologically, the concept of reincarnation is compatible with the Bahá’í Writings which explicitly reject it on ontological grounds. According to `Abdu'l-Bahá reincarnation, which is the repeated appearance of the same spirit with its former essence and condition in this same world of appearance, is impossible and unrealizable.

As the repetition of the same appearance is impossible and interdicted for each of the material beings, so for spiritual beings also, a return to the same condition, whether in the arc of descent or in the arc of ascent, is interdicted and impossible, for the material corresponds to the spiritual.[235]

There is no exact repetition in nature, and because `Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that “the material world corresponds to the spiritual world,”[236] he concludes that there is no such repetition in the spiritual world either. It may be objected that this statement applies to a Hindu, not Buddhist concept of re-incarnation, one in which a substantial spiritual entity re-appears in subsequent existences. However, given `Abdu'l-Bahá’s rejection of repetition in the natural and spiritual worlds, it is logical to assume that he would also reject the repetition of particular causal chains or sequences in various successive existences.

Conclusion

On the basis of this survey of major issues in Buddhist ontology, we conclude that while genuine differences between Buddhist and Bahá’í ontology exist, on a significant number of the most fundamental issues, they agree and that on others where there is no outright agreement, there is convergence. Ontologically speaking, the two religions differ more in emphasis, on what they choose to elaborate, than in basic ontological doctrines per se. That is exactly what we would expect from the Bahá’í teaching that differences among religions arise not from their foundational principles but from the time and circumstances of their revelation.[237] Our

findings thus support Bahá'u'lláh's teaching on the "fundamental oneness of religion." [238]

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- [228] `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, Chapter 81, p.282.
- [229] To regard the mere return of qualities as reincarnation creates enormous ethical problems among other things. How, for example, can one justify that a person who has never existed before is saddled with negative qualities caused by actions s/he did not commit?
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