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The Hindu Buddha
according to the Theology of the Bengali Vaishnava Acharya
Bhaktivedanta Swami

By

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In the broad Indian religious culture we find two basic concepts of the inner structure of the Holy. The Advaita religion believes in the 'not-two' will say absolute 'oneness' of the ultimate reality. The Dvaita religion yet believes in 'two' will say the dual structure of the whole. Nevertheless, the latter one is no radical dualism because it recognises nothing to be outside the last reality. It is a kind of 'dualist monism' and insofar fundamentally different to West Asian and European moderate or radical dualism.

The Dvaita religion experiences the inner structure of the Holy as everlasting dynamic relation of the whole and its parts. As a rule, the representation of the whole is the personal God, mostly called Bhagavan. The representations of the parts are the soul or jivas. Mostly following the idea the whole being a personal God the Dvaita religion is something like theism; yet, it is an Indian or Hindu theism teaching that the Godhead comprises within herself souls and matter, too. By the way, many of the jivas aren't conscious of their role within the Holy. They erroneously take themselves for empty monads and believe that they would get their realisation only by implementing themselves with 'matter'. Experiencing in this concern the uselessness of matter, the maya energy of the Godhead, they can get the true consciousness of their role as divine co-players in the inner divine play

or lila.

The co-called Vaishnavas [1] constitute the majority within the fold of the Dvaitas. They admire Vishnu (mostly under his name of Krishna) as the only, universal and personal God. They realise Vishnu-Krishna as the highest personality of Godhead and realise themselves as 'smaller' personalities of the Divine. Vishnu is understood as a saviour. When the world order, the dharma, has become disturbed he leaves the heaven, vaikuntha, into the world as welfare-bringing God incarnate. Such a descending saviour called by the Indian 'avatar', has been according to the Vaishnavas Gautama Buddha.

No wonder, quite standing in that tradition and initiated in its guru line the world-well-known Gaudiya Vaishnava teacher and founder of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness [ISKCON], Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896-1977) [2], described the Buddha as God incarnate, as a manifestation of the highest personality of Godhead.

Although being the highest personality himself, Krishna completed [and completes until to-day?] as the Buddha a closely circumscribed redeeming task. Bhaktivedanta Swami quotes in that connection a Vaishnava poem, where that particular task is sung very beautifully: "O Lord Krishna, You have assumed the form of Lord Buddha, taking compassion on the poor animals." [3] God came thus as Buddha into this world, to spread as lord and protector of the animals ahimsa, non-violence.

In his comment on the Shrimad Bhagavatam, one of the most authoritative holy writings of the Vaishnavas, Bhaktivedanta Swami goes more in detail about the Buddha; the text regarding this issue is translated by him with the following words: "Then, in the beginning of Kali-yuga, the Lord will appear as Lord Buddha, the son of Anjana, in the province of Gaya, just for the purpose of deluding those who are the faithful theist." [4] The commentator interprets that passage as follows: "Buddha, a powerful incarnation of the personality of Godhead, ..., preached his own conception of non-violence and deprecated even the sacrifices sanctioned in the Vedas." [5]

During Buddha's time most humans were atheists and preferred animal meat of every other food. Under the pretext of executing Vedic sacrifices they had almost every place transformed into a slaughter house, where the animals were killed without any restriction. [6] Since those humans indulged in atheism, Krishna appeared as an atheist so that he could easier convince the people. Therefore, by reasons of missionary tactics and not at all by religious enlightenment Buddha become an atheist. The (in reality) theistic Buddha stated his (not real) disbelief of the Vedas assessing them as extremely harmful for the souls.

However, he made these apparently anti-Vedic statements only to divert the animal murdering atheists from the Vedas which were wrongly interpreted by asuras or so-called scholars of Vedic literature teaching the necessity of animal-killing. For avoiding those killings "Lord Buddha superficially denied the authority of the Vedas." [7]

Krishna incarnated as the atheistic Buddha rejecting the Vedas to liberate the misled souls from the sin of animal-killing and to save the animals to be killed. He

is the saviour and protector of souls which are reincarnated in the shape of human and animal bodies: "This rejection of the Vedas by Lord Buddha was adopted in order to save people from the vice of animal-killing as well as to save the poor animals from the slaughtering of their big brothers." [8]

Krishna-Buddha stopped that animal-killing particularly because it is immediately connected with atheism, in disbelief in the real God. Therefore, upbringing the people to ahimsa he pre-pared them for the re-conversion to the theism: "Less intelligent men of age of Kali, who had no faith in God, followed his principle, and for the time being they were trained in moral discipline and non-violence, the preliminary steps for proceeding further on the path of God realization." [9]

Krishna had to use the strategy of accommodation in order to bring the humans of his atheistic time on the necessary preliminary stage of God realisation. He did not only delude the people by acting as an atheist agitator but also by offering himself as a real gurudeva. Therefore, his atheist followers "kept their absolute faith in Lord Buddha". The miracle of Buddha's mission is clear: "Thus the faithless people were made to believe in God in the form of Lord Buddha." [10]

The mission tactics based on deception rises from the loving-kindness of Krishna to those humans, who cannot notice him in his actual nature; in spite of their inability, he gives them nevertheless the possibility of doing this in other way, through the guru-religion: "That was the mercy of Lord Buddha: he made the faithless faithful to him." [11]

The God of Baktivedanta Swami is thus a God, who regarding the faith does not leave his creatures alone, but comes to meet them in a shape appropriate to their mentality and situation.

Not only the gurudeva-religion of Buddha but also the mission of the Advaita philosopher Shankaracharya [12] lead to real God realisation integrating in this way the traditional main adversaries of the Vaishnavas into Krishna's order of salvation: "Lord Buddha preached the preliminary principles of the Vedas in a manner suitable for the time being (and also did Sankaracarya) to establish the authority of the Vedas. Therefore both Lord Buddha and Acaraya Sankara paved the path of theism." [13]

In the Adi Lila of the Shri Caitanya-caritamrita Bhaktivedanta Swami says once more that the Advaita philosopher Shankaracharya tried to convert the atheists of his time. In order to lead those atheists back to the Dvaita theism: "Unfortunately, Shri Shankaracarya, by the order of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, compromised between atheism and theism in order to cheat the atheists and bring them to theism." [14] To re-establish the authority of the Vedas, he did not teach the Vedas in their original purely theistic understanding, but in a sub-theistic Advaita interpretation. [15]

However, this concept of restoring theism conflicts with Shiva's words to his wife Parvati quoted by Bhaktivedanta Swami: "Similarly, in explaining Vedanta I describe the same Mayavada philosophy in order to mislead the entire population toward atheism by denying the personal form of God." [16]

While Shankaracharya deceived humans in the name of Shiva by the wrong Vedanta interpretation of the Vedas, in order to entice to atheism or to bind over

the atheists fraudulently again to the Vedas in the name of Krishna, the mission of the Buddha existed in an action-oriented moral preparatory course for salvation.

In the Madhya-Lila of the Shri Caitanya-caritamrita Bhaktivedanta Swami represents the salvation-bringing task of the Buddhism still more clearly than in the Shrimad Bhagavatam: "Lord Buddha's intention was to stop atheists from committing the sin of killing animals. Atheists cannot understand God; therefore Lord Buddha appeared and spread the philosophy of non-violence to keep the atheists from killing animals. Unless one is free from the sin of animal killing, he cannot understand religion or God. Although Lord Buddha was an incarnation of Krishna, he did not speak about God, for the people were unable to understand. He simply wanted to stop animal killing." [17]

While Shiva incarnated as the brahmin Shankaracarya falsified the Vedas in the sense of Mayavada philosophy to entice the humans to atheism [18], Buddha came down on earth as Krishna's avatar to lead the atheists indirectly to the Krishna consciousness. Bhaktivedanta Swami understands thus the Buddhism as redeeming ethics, the Hindu Shivaism of Shankara-carya yet as havoc racking religion of the God anger.

However, that judgment on Buddha has an important theological consequence for the religious relationship of Vaishnavas and Buddhists: the followers of both religions admire the same God. By its preparatory ahimsa moral Buddhism smoothes the way to the realisation of Buddha's true nature which is nothing else than Krishna consciousness. Yet, the pre-condition of this statement is that God's realisation is only possible by a previous ahimsa practice [19]. Therefore, bhakti without ahimsa is only a worthless pseudo-piety.

In the context of that his Buddha theology Bhaktivedanta Swami's amazing statement referring to the today's Buddhism becomes clear: "We are glad that people are taking interest in the non-violent movement of Lord Buddha." [20]. It's very important to see that he doesn't continue his statement with a call for conversion to the pure Krishna consciousness, i.e. to his own religious community; instead he continues his statement with a Buddhist inquiry to the Buddhists: "But will they take the matter very seriously and close the animal slaughterhouses altogether?" [21] He closes with a just as Buddhist warning: "If not, there is no meaning to the ahimsa cult." [22]

Even thus the radical Hindu theism does not question the fundamental affiliation - as it means - atheist Buddhism to the own religion. He commits himself in this regard rather theologically so much that the acknowledgement of the Buddhists as devotees does not depend on their position to the theists. Even the strict Vaishnavas are too strong rooted in the common Dharma religion of India that they can't judge the Buddha devotees as disbelieving ones. One could do nearly think, that regarding salvation the Buddhism would be in the view of the Vaishnavas closer to themselves than the Hindu Advaita religion of Shankaracarya.

However, concerning his answer to our question about the relationship of Hinduism and Buddhism Bhaktivedanta Swami never doubts despite all criticism [23] that Buddha was a Hindu and Buddhism, therefore, is part of Hinduism. When a journalist without knowing any Indian sophistications once asked the Swami in

the jargon of Western religious terminology, whether the Krishna consciousness was linked with any other religion or is due to Hinduism or Buddhism, he although being by such a roughness of the question a little bit disconcerted finally answered in a typical Hindu manner and blowing up all sectarian isolation - with the confession of his own Hinduism and his acknowledgement of the Hinduism of Buddha: "Yes, you can call it Hinduism, but actually it does not belong to any 'ism'. It is a science of understanding God. But it appears like Hindu religion. In that sense Buddha religion is also Hindu religion, because Lord Buddha was a Hindu and he started Buddha religion." [24]

Amongst the Hindus, in particular those adhering to Hindu modernism, developed by Swami Vivekananda [25], there is consent over the fact that Buddhists belong to the Hindu Dharma equally. Bhaktivedanta Swami has been of the same opinion. However, this is all the more considerable, as the Vaishnava theists and Bhaktivedanta Swami too believe that the Buddhism is atheistic and therefore reject that particular Hindu Dharma religion as possible way for them.

Notes

For technical reasons no diacritical indications have been used.

1] Literally: The devotees of Vishnu, usually Krishnaites.

2] Born in Calcutta, Bengal. It was brought up in the Radha Krishna religion of his hometown and received there from Scottish missionaries his college training. See Peter Schmidt: A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami im interreligiösen Dialog [Bhaktivedanta Swami in the Inter-religious dialogue], [THEION](#) - Annual for Religious Culture, vol. X, Frankfurt am Main etc. 1999.

3] Lectures on Bhagavadgita, 20. 7. 1966, New York. Bhaktivedanta VedaBase, Featuring the Complete Teachings of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1995 [CD-Rom], No. 326520.

4] Srimad Bhagavatam (=SB), Canto 1, c.3.24. Translation probably better: "With the intention to mislead 'sura dvisam', the God-envious people, i.e. the asuras, the Buddha, with name Añjana's son, will appear in Gaya [?]".

5] SB, *ibid.*

6] SB, *ibid.*

7] SB, *ibid.*

8] SB, *ibid.*

9] SB, *ibid.*

10] SB, *ibid.* Yet, in the Vishnu Purana c. 17 we read: "When the mighty Vishnu heard their [sc. the Gods; the author] requests, he emitted from his body an illusory form, which he gave to the gods, and thus spoke: "This deceptive vision shall wholly beguile the Daityas [sc. the enemies of the gods; the author]."

11] SB, *ibid.*

12] Hindu philosopher and monk from Kerala (8th century), promoting of Hinduism and criticising Buddhism. Cf., Sylvia Mangold: Sri Adi Sankaracarya, [THEION](#) - Annual of Religious Culture IV, Frankfurt am Main etc. 1994. 13] SB, *ibid.*

14] Shri Caitanya-caritamrita (= SCC), Adi-lila, c. 7.110

15] SCC, *ibid.*

16] SCC, *ibid.*

17] SCC, Madhya-lila, c. 25.42

18] Bhaktivedanta Swami doesn't give any reason for Krishna's deeds not deserving salvation.

19] Atheism is obviously caused by animal killing; cf., SCC Madhya-lila, ibid.

20] SB, ibid.

21] SB, ibid.

22] SB, ibid.

23] SCC, Madhya-lila, c. 9.48-61. In this passage Bhaktivedanta Swami presents the essential differences to the Buddhist religion.

24] Room Conversations with Journalist. May 19, 1975, Melbourne. 750519rc.mel.

Bhaktivedanta VedaBase, Featuring the Complete Teachings of His Divine Grace A.C.

Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1995 [CD-Rom], No. 455204.

25] Cf., Edmund Weber: Swami Vivekananda and the Buddhism. Journal of Religious Culture [No.05b](#) (1997)