

**The Buddhism of HPB and the Masters:
Reconciling the Self of Vedānta and the no-self of Buddhism**

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In 1880, on their first visit to Sri Lanka, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott formally became Buddhists. I think they were the first American citizens to do so. It should be noted, however, that conversions among Buddhists and theosophists on the island of Sri Lanka were going both ways during that visit, with a large number of Buddhists joining the Society, without necessarily ceasing to consider themselves Buddhists. This was not HPB's first contact with Buddhism. Her grandfather had been the appointed trustee of the Kalmuck Buddhist tribes in Astrakhan, whose leader spent most of his time at his devotions in a Buddhist temple built for that purpose. HPB's grandmother, a well-known Russian novelist, lived with him there for a year during which she wrote a novel on Kalmuck life (Cranston 1993, p.13-14). So while still a young girl HPB had been exposed to Buddhist teachings and customs through the office of her grandfather; and by the formation of the Theosophical Society, she had also spent time with her teachers in Tibet.

Most practicing Buddhists, including Christmas Humphreys, seem to have had no problem with HPB's brand of theosophical Buddhism. Humphreys was not only a dedicated member of the TS but also founder of the Buddhist Society, which began life as the Buddhist Lodge in London, but broke away from the TS in 1926. His very popular book, *Buddhism*, makes frequent reference to HPB and to Theosophy. The renowned Buddhist scholar Edward Conze was also a theosophist. But a number of critics over the years have regarded HPB as a very odd sort of Buddhist.

So what kind of a Buddhist was H.P. Blavatsky? Well she was certainly no "average Buddhist", as she herself once noted:

We are accused of propagating ideas that would surprise the "average" Buddhist. Granted, and I will liberally add that the average Brahminist might be equally astonished. We never said that we were either Buddhists or Brahminists in the sense of their popular exoteric theologies. We do not write for "average" Buddhists or average people of any sort ... (Blavatsky 1966/1988, p.332/3).

HPB made her position as a Buddhist quite clear in “The Real Madame H.P. Blavatsky” published in *La Revue Spirite* in 1878. Having first denied that she had ‘embraced the “Buddhist faith”’ she then goes on to explain:

It is true that I regard the philosophy of Gautama Buddha as the most sublime system; the purest, and, above all, the most *logical* of all. But the system has been distorted during the centuries by the ambition and fanaticism of the priests and has become a popular religion ... Just as in every pure and primitive system, introduced by the great religious reformers of the ancient world, its rays have diverged too far from their common centre - *the Vedas of the Aryans*; and although among all modern beliefs the Buddhist Church may be the only one to encourage its members to question its dogmas and to seek the last word of every mystery which is taught therein - I much prefer to hold to the *mother* source rather than to depend upon any of the numerous streams that flow from it ... Now although I admire with all my soul the lofty philosophy of Siddhārtha, or Sākya-Muni, I bow quite as much before the moral grandeur and the powerful logic of the Hindu Kapila, the great Achārya, who was, however, the most implacable enemy of the Buddha. While the latter looked on the *Vedas* as the supreme authority - the Buddhists rejected them after all, though it was proved, nevertheless, that Gautama in his reform ... based himself entirely upon the esoteric meaning of the grand primitive Scriptures (Blavatsky 1966/1988, p.402).

So in the above we have the following points to consider: HPB regards the Vedas as the common centre of both Buddhism and Vedantism; she admires Sāṅkhya metaphysics as much as Vedānta and Buddhism, holding most of all to their source; and she believed that the Buddha based his teaching on the esoteric meaning of the Vedas, by which I take it that she means Vedānta, the “esoteric” or most subtle philosophy of the Upanishads. The Founders are described by HPB as ‘esoteric *Buddhists* or Advaites which is all one’ (Blavatsky ?, p.474). The term “advaites” refers to Advaita Vedānta the dominant philosophy of nonduality in India.

HPB’s teachers, the Mahatmas, were not average Buddhists either, with KH once pointing out that when it comes to Brahmanical esoteric teaching and Arhat Buddhist teaching only the terminology is different, both are identical in essential meaning (Letter No. 60 Barker (comp.) 1993, p.156).

Here are some of HPB’s explanations. When using the word Buddhism, she was more often than not referring to the wisdom religion rather than to the Buddhist faith. In

commenting on a statement made by a Buddhist scholar, that the book *Esoteric Buddhism* by A.P. Sinnett, was neither Buddhism nor esoteric, HPB remarked that this was the result of ‘the unfortunate mistake of ... connecting the system with Gautama’s religion instead of with the Secret Wisdom taught by Krishna, Sankaracharya, and by many others, as much as by Buddha’ (Blavatsky 1888/1977 a, p.539). In *Key to Theosophy*, HPB made the same point, stating that Buddhism would better have been spelt with a single “d” as Budhism:

[T]hen *Budhism* would have meant what it was intended for merely “Wisdomism” (Bodha, Bodhi “intelligence,” “wisdom”) instead of *Buddhism*, Gautama’s religious philosophy. Theosophy, as already said, is the WISDOM RELIGION (Blavatsky 1889/1987, p.13).

She and Sinnett regarded the book as a vehicle communicating ‘a series of leading ideas relating to the actual verities of Nature, and the real facts of man’s progress through evolution’; and not as a discourse on the Buddhist faith (quoted in Sinnett 1885).

Another reason for her apparently casual attitude to this and that faith is expressed in a letter to her aunt Nadya, in which she articulates an archetypal theosophical position:

If there were no dogmas, there would also be no Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Brahmanists, etc.; all would believe in One God ... all would regard themselves as brothers ... [and] they would be ashamed before the rest of their brothers to kill and slaughter each other in wars ... and to create a hell for each other (Cranston 1993, p.107).

She may not have been an ordinary or an average Buddhist, but as Sylvia Cranston reports, the eminent Buddhist philosopher D.T. Suzuki believed that HPB ‘had in some way been initiated into the deeper Mahayana teaching’. Until Suzuki brought Mahāyāna Buddhism to the West in about 1907 only the Hinayāna or Southern Buddhist texts had been studied, so when he came across *The Voice of the Silence* in 1910 Professor Suzuki was really surprised, remarking to his wife: ‘Here is the real Mahayana Buddhism’ (cited in Cranston 1993, p.84). There is a great deal in *The Voice of the Silence* that might evoke such a response, including its references to the Bodhisattva ideal of forsaking Nirvāna for the salvation of others; and its teaching on karma that is so close to Suzuki’s own explanation. For example, we can compare the karma doctrine in *The Voice of the Silence* with that of Suzuki’s *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* published about eighteen years later. The VOS states: ‘Learn that no efforts, not the smallest - whether in right or wrong direction, can vanish from the world of causes’ (Blavatsky 1889/1984, p.58). The

same teaching is given by Professor Suzuki as follows: ‘Any act, good or evil, once committed and conceived, never vanishes like a bubble in water, but lives, potentially or actively as the case may be, in the world of minds and deeds’ (Suzuki 1907/1973, p.183). That is my personal favourite short-hand description of the karma doctrine. The resemblance to the statement in *The Voice of the Silence* is striking, though, is it not?

There are other more startling similarities, which may have taken Suzuki by surprise, including a statement that is possibly known to everyone here: ‘For mind is like a mirror; it gathers dust while it reflects. It needs the gentle breezes of Soul-Wisdom to brush away the dust of our illusions...’ (Blavatsky 1889/1984, p.47). In his book *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind*, Professor Suzuki quoted the same Shen-hsiu referred to by Madame Blavatsky in her note to the above remark. The passage in Suzuki’s book reads as follows: ‘This body is the Bodhi-tree. The mind is like a mirror bright; Take heed to keep it always clean / And let not dust collect upon it’ (Suzuki 1949/1977, p.17). In the first edition of *The Voice of the Silence* HPB gave the teacher of this doctrine as Shen-Sien. (In the latest edition it is Shen- Sieu, which is an alternative spelling to Hsui). It is highly unlikely that anything by Shen-hsiu was published in English in 1899, or that HPB would have had access to it, if it had been, largely confined to her chair by that stage. She is more likely to have gained access to this teaching through her own teachers, and/or psychically, and as she and her teachers admitted, this was not the most accurate method of conveying information. This perhaps corroborates Mead’s testimony of her method of working with quotations, when he said that: ‘these things were dictated to or impressed upon her psychically by living teachers and friends, most of whom she had known physically ... [and that] at times she got things tangled up badly’ (Mead 1904).

BUDDHISM AND VEDĀNTA RECONCILED

Having shown something of HPB’s credentials as a Buddhist, and clarified her “conversion,” let us now take a closer look at her brand of Vedantic Buddhism and see whether this is a peculiarity of hers and that of her teachers, or whether she is in fact justifying Suzuki’s suspicion that, in some way, HPB had, in fact, been initiated into a very profound system of Mahāyāna Buddhism (a view shared by her private secretary, the scholar of Platonism and Hermeticism, G.R.S. Mead).

As already indicated, in HPB’s view, esoteric Buddhism and Brahmanism are one, ‘for the former is derived from the latter’ (Blavatsky 1968, p.399). Now the most essential thing in Brahmanical or Vedantic teaching is the *ātman* doctrine, whereas the *anātman* doctrine is central to Buddhism; so HPB and her teachers are saying that there is no

essential difference between the Hindu *ātman* doctrine and the Buddhist *anātman* doctrine (a view that I share), and herein appears to lie the most fundamental peculiarity in the Buddhism of HPB and the Masters.

First of all let us take a closer look at the *ātman* doctrine. Behind all the gods of the *Rig Veda*, the authors of the Upanishads discovered the *ātman* or universal Self: 'Of that Self they predicated three things only, that it is, that it perceives, and that it enjoys eternal bliss' (Müller 1883/2002, p.176), in other words it is *sat-cit-ānanda*. The authors of the Upanishads also discovered the *ātman* within the human being, the microcosm: 'behind the veil of the body, behind the senses, behind the mind, and behind our reason (in fact behind the mythology of the soul, which we often call psychology)' (Müller 1883/2002, p.176). Max Müller referred to this Self as, 'the Looker-on, a subject independent of all personality' (Müller 1883/2002, p.177). So in Hindu thought the *ātman* is a self, but not a personal self.

According to all schools of Hindu metaphysics with the possible exception of one (the carvaka), the *ātman*, which is identical in nature to *Brahman*, is veiled in a series of bodies or sheaths (*kosa-s*) of increasing density and opaqueness. The total form of the human being consists of several bodies: the *Annamaya kosa*, *Prānamaya kosa*, *Manomaya kosa*, *Vijñānamaya kosa* and the *Ānandamaya kosa* (Baladeva 1912, p.30). Inside the dense physical body, through which we hear, see, feel, taste and smell, there is a more interior body consisting of breath (*prāna*). Inside the *Prānamaya kosa* is the *Manomaya kosa*, the mental body, which fills the former and is more interior. Inside the mental body, or mind organ, is the *Vijñānamaya kosa* 'which consists of understanding', or *buddhi*, which is more interior still. Filling this body, and interior to it, is the *Ānandamaya kosa* which consists of an abundance of bliss, *ānanda* (Baladeva 1912, p.30/9). Each *kosa* is a sheath which both conceals and contains the body above or within itself. In each successive sheath the *ātman* is more densely covered, until in the physical body, the *Annamaya kosa*, it is very densely veiled indeed (*annamaya kosa*, from *anna*, meaning food). The five *kosas* comprise the body of the *ātman*, which is the Self of this entity belonging to the phenomenal world, and at the same time an individual expression of what is actually universal. As S. Radhakrishnan put it: 'At the back of this whole structure is the Universal Consciousness, Ātman, which is our true being' (Radhakrishnan 1953/1990, p.91).

In Hindu metaphysics the *ātman* is basically regarded as—

- universal and impersonal
- non-empirical
- transcendent

- innermost (and thus both transcendent and immanent)
- the Knower, the Watcher, the Seer, or the Looker-on
- existing behind the veil of the senses, the mind and the objective world
- that which never becomes anything
- consciousness itself
- *sat-cit-ānanda* - existence, consciousness, bliss
- not known by the senses but by the “purified intellect” or direct intuitive perception
- the Self underlying all reality, the oneness of the subjective and objective

Turning to the Buddhist *anātman* doctrine we find many superficial disagreements with the *ātman* doctrine. For example, Suzuki once summarised Buddhist teachings in four sayings: All is momentary; All is empty; All is without self; All is such as it is (Suzuki 1907/1973, p.140). The notion that all is without self would seem to contradict the idea of a Self that is universally diffused. The differences between the four Buddhist and four Vedantin sayings are obvious, but a closer look discloses important similarities.

Four Sayings of Vedānta	Four Sayings of Mahāyāna Buddhism
Ātman Brahman (ātman= Brahman)	All is momentary (Sarvam ksanikam)
Aham Brahmasmi (I and Brahman are one)	All is empty (Sarvam sunyam)
Tat tvam asi (That thou art)	All is without self (Sarvam anātmam)
Prajñānam Brahman (Intuitive wisdom = Brahman)	All is such as it is (Sarvam tathātvam)

Now the Hindu notion that the innermost Self is one with Brahman, the eternal All, would seem to be contradicted by the Buddhist notion that everything is empty of *ātman*, without self, and momentary. But this contradiction is an illusion based on a misunderstanding of what Buddhists mean by the word *ātman*. Or, on the part of some Buddhists, it may be a misunderstanding of what Vedantists mean by *ātman* and universal Self. To clear up this matter it is enough to know that Suzuki translates *anātman* or non-*ātman* as non-ego (for example Suzuki 1907/1973 p.37). That is an accurate description of the Buddhist doctrine, but the word *ātman*, in Vedānta, does not mean ego and should never be translated as such. As Professor Müller explains, the *ātman* is 'an expression of nothing but the purest and highest subjectiveness ... far more abstract than our Ego, [it is] the Self of all things' (Müller 1883/2002, p.172). Suzuki has not made a mistake in

translating *ātman* as ego: but he is translating the word from the Buddhist point of view, as it arises in Buddhist texts. In Hindu thought *ātman* does not refer to ego at all, it refers to the universal Self, which is impersonal, ego-less. The same word is doing two quite different duties. So the Buddhist doctrine of non-*ātman* is a theory of non-ego (equally shared by Vedantists, incidentally), it is not a theory according to which the universal Self does not exist. As D.T. Suzuki has observed:

When the Vedānta philosophy ... speaks of *ātman* as our inmost self which is identical with the universal Brahṁā, it is used in its most abstract metaphysical sense and does not mean the soul whatever, as the latter is commonly understood by vulgar minds. On the other hand, Buddhists understand by *ātman* this vulgar, materialistic conception of soul (*bhutātman*) and positively deny its existence as such ... The *ātman* of Buddhism is the phenomenal ego, namely, a concrete agent that is supposed to do the acting, thinking, and feeling; while the *ātman* of Vedantists is the noumenal ego as the *raison d'être* of our psychical life. The one is in fact material ... the other is a highly metaphysical conception transcending the reach of human discursive knowledge. ... (Suzuki 1907/1973, p.145).

Based on the same understanding, HPB once argued:

Eastern philosophy - occult or esoteric - does not admit of an “I” separate from the Universe, objective or subjective, material or spiritual - otherwise than as a temporary illusion during the cycle of our incarnations. It is this regrettable *illusion*, the “heresy of separateness” or personality, the idea that our “I” is distinct in eternity from the Universal Ego, that has to be conquered and destroyed as the root of selfishness and all evil, before we can get rid of rebirths and reach Nirvāna (‘Problems of Life’ in Blavatsky 1980, p.407).

Both Vedānta and Buddhism maintain the illusoriness and transience of the ego: and both have a conception of something (that is not a thing) permeating all existence, and far more profound and universal than the ego as generally conceived. Furthermore, in Buddhism there are a number of concepts comparable to that of Brahman, including *Dharmakāya*, which is believed to be ‘the ultimate reality that underlies all particular phenomena ... that which makes the existence of individuals possible’ (Suzuki 1907/1973, p.45-6); the Buddha-nature; original nature; realizing-nature; truth nature; pure nature; root-nature; enlightenment-nature and *svabhāva*, self-nature or self-being (Suzuki 1949/1977, p.39-40). All are comparable to the notion of Brahman and *ātman* in

Vedānta and all imply the existence of some Self in the Vedantic sense, that is, a universally diffused Self or ultimate constituent that is not a substance or a thing.

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes: ‘If you believe in a permanent self, a self that exists forever, a separate, independent self, your belief cannot be described as Buddhist’ (Nhat Hanh 1996, p.52). But neither does Advaita Vedānta affirm the existence of an independent separate self that exists forever. What exists forever is the impersonal or universal Self, the *ātman* that is finally identical with Brahman, the vastness, the All. Thus, the contradiction between Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta is more apparent than real. What Buddhists generally deny is the existence of a God which stands aloof from the creation, ‘and who meddles occasionally with human affairs’; and a soul, ‘which, secretly hiding itself behind all mental activities, directs them after the fashion of an organist striking different notes as he pleases’ (Suzuki 1907/1973, p.31-40). That is Suzuki’s view at any rate. There is no director of mental operations in Buddhism: that which appears to us to be directing things is merely another mental operation. As J. Krishnamurti suggested, the analyser is the analysed, the observer is the observed: there is no one outside or aloof who is analysing, observing, or directing mental operations.

Another potentially contentious point is that HPB, a Buddhist, affirms that ‘*The Secret Doctrine* teaches no Atheism’ (Blavatsky 1888/1977 a, p.279); and that ‘Occult Philosophy, as a whole, is based absolutely on the ubiquitous presence of God, the Absolute Deity’ (Blavatsky 1980, p.569). These notions would appear to be antithetical to common garden variety Buddhism. The following statement of hers is even more heretical, although given the understanding of Buddhism expressed by Suzuki and other senior Buddhists, it is amply justified:

The true Buddhist, recognising no “personal god,” nor any “Father” and “Creator of Heaven and Earth,” still believes in an *absolute consciousness*, “Adi-Buddhi”; and the Buddhist philosopher *knows* that there are Planetary Spirits, the “Dhyan Chohans”. But though he admits of “spiritual lives,” yet, as they are temporary in eternity, even they, according to his philosophy, are “the *māyā* of the *day*,” the *illusion* of a “day of Brahmā” (Blavatsky 1888/1977 a, p.635).

Therefore, as Suzuki suggests, Buddhism can only be regarded as a religion without God and without soul if we understand God and soul in the non-Advaitic dualistic sense. Both Buddhism and Vedānta deny the permanent existence or ultimate reality of a personal self and affirm the existence of the universal Self which makes the existence of individual lives possible. Of this universal Self the Upanishads affirm only ‘that it is, that it

perceives, and that it enjoys eternal bliss' (Müller 1883/2002, p.176), The innermost Self of the human being, indeed of all living beings, is this *ātman* which is Brahman, the vastness, the All. In Buddhist terminology this same mystery is known as *Dharmakāya*, the ultimate reality. Thus, HPB and her teachers were right when they suggested that there is no essential difference between Arhat Buddhism and esoteric Brahmanism, and if they are very peculiar sorts of Buddhists then so is D.T. Suzuki who appears to be in substantial agreement with HPB on this subject.

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