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COMPLEMENTARITY OF BUDDHIST DENOMINATIONS

Introduction

The present author believes that it is only by a process of branching out a movement can develop. This applies also to religions. By 'a process of branching out' I do not mean merely the multiplication of religious institutes, but even the diversification of the views and interpretations of the same faith. A religion branches out by encouraging a plurality of views and interpretations of its faith-content. For an impartial observer a new view or interpretation, even if it is perfectly in tune with the orthodox position, may appear to the well-intentioned traditionalists to be a threat to the unity of faith. This can happen even in the case of merely administrative or other functional divisions of a religion, which in fact only serves to assist its expansion. I know of a Catholic religious congregation in this country which had to face tremendous opposition from its own members when it was proposed to be divided into provinces for administrative convenience. However, even those who were opposed to the idea of division would have to accept that for the congregation to grow in number and achieve efficiency in its undertakings, such a division was inevitable. Even so they felt that the unity of the congregation was at stake. This was obviously an unwarranted fear generated by a false idea of unity. If the question of a merely administrative division can cause pain, then that of a doctrinal and disciplinary division of a religion, however legitimate it may be, will be much more painful to the conscientious members. It is indeed the birth-pang, and, therefore, to be welcomed as it will bring new life and vigour.

It is in this perspective that I look at the various traditions or forms of Buddhism. There are indeed very many forms into which Buddhism has branched out in the course of its history down the centuries, starting from about 600 B.C. The *tervāda* school, the *hinayāna* schools called *vaibhāsika* and *sautrāntika*, the *mahayāna* schools called *mādhyamika* and *yogacāra*, and the Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Burmese and other forms of Buddhism are under reference here. For a Buddhist, all except his own tradition will appear to be break-away movements, and, therefore, heretical. For an

outsider, however, each of them is a development of the original Buddhism in one way or another and, therefore, makes specific contributions to the Buddhist philosophy and religion. One may even state that with these diverse forms, Buddhism has grown from strength to strength and has been able to cater to the needs of the people belonging to the various cultural and historical settings the world over. Without such a diversity of forms Buddhism would remain a rather insignificant ideology among many others!

So the proposal of the present article is this: There are indeed a number of different schools within Buddhism which arose in various cultural and historical contexts. They have each its own identity and individuality and its own contribution to make and, therefore, each of them has a right to exist on its own. All the same, these schools need not be regarded as being opposed to each other; they do not necessarily contradict each other; on the contrary, they complement each other by bringing out newer and newer dimensions of the same old teachings of the Buddha, or by presenting the latter in a new style, or by enriching it with the discovery of newer possibilities. A suggestion that I made in my *A Doctrine of Buddhist Experience*¹ may be recalled here :

... Buddhism, throughout its long history of development, has ever retained the original inspiration of its founder, the Buddha. The latter believed in a multiplicity of real, individual, beings, a belief that has never been seriously questioned by of his followers. The different stages in the history of Buddhism mark, if anything, the different ways of looking at the same teaching of the Buddha. Consequently, the different schools within Buddhism distinguish from each other not so much in their philosophy as in their practices. If, for example, there has been a movement from the non-theistic *Teravada* school of Buddhism to the theistic *Mahayana* school of the same, it is a change only in the religious practices, and not a change in the philosophical convictions... One thing remarkable about the entire history of the Buddhist thought is that, at none of its stages, is any concept or term belonging to the former stages totally denied. The arrival of a new school is signalled almost always by the introduction of some new concepts and terms rather than by the denial of the old ones. The new concepts and terms are thus introduced as if they were the missing links in the original Buddhism, and, therefore, under the pretext, or

1. Delhi : Motilal Benarsidass, 1982, p. xvii.

with the intention of, making explicit what was already implicit in it. The genius of each school then consists in fitting the new concepts and terms into the original scheme of thought by interpreting or readjusting it.

The Original Vision

The Buddha inaugurate a new social order in which the individuals enjoyed equality, fraternity and freedom. He denounced discrimination against any individual on the basis of caste, and refused to accept the Brahmin claim to superiority over the other sections of humanity. He also refused to accept the Vedas as infallible sources of truth, and criticized the practice of rituals believed to be mechanical means of achieving one's desires; he also condemned sacrifices involving the killing of innocent animals. On the other hand, he emphasized virtues like compassion and love, non-violence and charity, self-discipline and meditation. In the place of the Brahmanic dogmatism and institutionalism, the Buddha stressed self-reliance, personal experience and democratic procedures. The Buddha did not indulge in abstract speculations which did not have any practical application. Direct treatment of the human illness of suffering was his priority. He discovered the root cause of human suffering to be selfishness, which he called *tanhā*. He described the reality of mind and matter as dynamic, fast moving from moment to moment, according to the law of dependent origination.

So much for a bare outline of the vision of the Buddha. Now, regarding the question whether the later denominations or schools of Buddhism are to be regarded as divisions or complementary movements, the answer would depend to a great extent on whether or not have given up any part of the original vision of the Buddha. As a matter of fact, then, none of the later schools of Buddhism has denied the original vision. On the contrary, each of them claims to be accepting it fully, and in the process trying to understand it in order to present it even better, for which newer sets of concepts and terms may be employed. These concepts and terms, though absent from the original Buddhist writings, are believed to serve the purpose of making explicit those aspects and meanings which were already implicit in the teachings of the Buddha. These schools, therefore, which appear to be in opposition one with another, have each the same intention, namely, to understand better and present more explicitly to different groups of people the same teachings of the Buddha. So at least

for an outsider the different schools of Buddhism represent the various possibilities of looking at the Buddha's teachings, and also to bring out their many dimensions. So objectively speaking, they are not only complementary to each other, but also developments of the teachings of the Buddha. Of course we need not ignore the fact that the new commentators may have at times deviated from the original vision in favour of their own personal views. However, the overall effect of these schools is that now Buddhism has developed into a multi-dimensional and rich system of thought and practice, which would not have taken place in the absence of these. The present development of Buddhism would be impossible without these new schools for two reasons: the development of any system in just one direction is bound soon to get stuck and exhausted; a single track development would remain confined to, or leave out, many aspects of the reality. In short, Buddhism is what it is today, because of the many denominations within it.

Complementarity of the Schools

Now let us examine a few Buddhist schools or denominations to find out their contributions or share in the development of Buddhism. Already at the second Buddhist Council which met at Vesali in about 350 B.C. a denominational difference between the conservative and liberal group of monks was clear. The conservative group called the *staviras* (the elders) insisted on the strict observance of the monastic rules as a necessary prerequisite for *nirvāṇa*, while the liberal group known as the *mahāsāṅghikas* was for a relaxation of the monastic rules in favour of lay spirituality. In the long run this difference of opinion turned out to be an advantage so that the two dimensions of Buddhist spirituality, monastic and lay, developed simultaneously. We shall say more about it later on.

The *staviras* eventually divided themselves into the *vaibhāsikas* and the *sautrāntikas*. Conservatism was their common feature. They differed from each other on a rather insignificant speculative point, namely, whether the object of perception is directly present or not. The background of the debate is the theory of momentariness, which in turn is a development of the Buddha's teaching that all is *anicca* (impermanent). According to the theory of momentariness, strictly understood, a thing does not exist for more than one moment, and consequently by the time one forms a concept of it subsequent to a sense impression of it, the thing will have gone out of existence, so that the perception turns out to be of a past thing. This is the position

taken by the *sautrāntikas*, while the *vaibhāṣikas* maintained that the object of perception is directly present to the perceiver. Here the former school is consistent with the theory of momentariness, but inconsistent with the common man's experience, while the latter school is consistent with experience, but inconsistent with the theory. However, this debate has revealed the logical implications and problems inherent in the theory of momentariness, and as such provides a self-criticism of Buddhism. Moreover, in the context of such a debate these schools undertook a very detailed analysis of the reality, psychic as well as physical. Especially the analysis of the human psyche made by these schools has become one of the most outstanding contributions of Buddhism to mankind. Even today the Buddhist psychoanalysis as presented in the *Abhidharma* remains for the most part unchallenged in the world of psychology, and it has inspired some of the modern psychologists like C.G. Jung and Sigmund Freud. The details of the analysis of the psyche made by the two schools under reference may be new in relation to the early Buddhist writings, but they definitely fit in with the early Buddhist views and, therefore, may be aptly considered elaborations of the latter. So these new schools of the elders need not be considered deviations from the original teachings of the Buddha, but natural developments of the same. These two schools, although they might have originated as rivals, have together not only paved the way for, but even worked out, the system of the Buddhist psychoanalysis. So in effect they are complementary to each other.

The *Mahāsaṅghikas* later on developed in two directions resulting in the schools called *mādhyamika* and *yogācāra*. They are together called the *mahāyāna* tradition of Buddhism. This was a more liberal development, and for that matter has been instrumental in promoting a new type of spiritual pursuit. The *mahāyāna* school, of course, differed on many points from the *hīnayāna* one comprising the above-mentioned *vaibhāṣikas* and *sautrāntikas*. An important point of difference is that for the *hīnanyānist*s, *nirvāṇa* is attainable only through monastic discipline so that it is beyond the reach of the lay people. The latter may associate themselves with the Buddhist *saṅgha* (community) by acts of charity towards the monks, which will eventually make them eligible for monastic life in this birth or later births. But the *mahāyānist*s believe that *nirvāṇa* is open to all irrespective of whether one is a monk or a lay person. Thus this school claims to be a broader path (*mahā-yāna*), and accuses the other school of being a narrow one (*hīna-yāna*). Another point of difference is that the *hīnanyānist*s believe that in following the path of *nirvāṇa* everyone is a loner so that the individuals cannot help

each other in any substantial manner, while the *mahāyānists* hold that the individuals may help each other substantially by mutually sharing their merits. That is, in the *mahāyāna* school the community is taken seriously, while in the other tradition it is taken very superficially. Yet another point of difference is the ideal of human perfection. For the *hīnayānists* an *arhat* is the ideal of perfection, who is little concerned about the other members of the society except in a nominal manner, while for the *mahāyānists* a *bodhisattva* is the ideal of perfection, who is full of compassion and love for others to the extent that he voluntarily prolongs his earthly sojourn in order to help others also to attain to the state of perfection.

But in spite of these differences, the two schools, *hīnayāna* and *mahāyāna*, are complementary to each other insofar as they have developed the two aspects of the human spirituality, the monastic and the lay, and as a result the division of Buddhism into these groups has helped the overall development of the Buddha's teachings. In the absence of *mahāyāna* tradition, Buddhism would remain a rather narrow system of monastic practices and casuistry impossible for the majority of mankind to follow. But with the appearance and development of the *mahāyāna* tradition, Buddhism has become open to all, with an appeal to a much wider section of mankind. Today's popularity of Buddhism all over the world should be attributed to its *mahāyāna* tradition, which has won sympathizers even among the Hindus, who had first reacted to Buddhism as a heretical teaching. But this does not mean that we can dispense with the *hīnayāna*. In spite of its being narrow in certain aspects, its contribution in the field of psychology is invaluable, and as such it remains the foundation of even the *mahāyāna* tradition; many indeed are the philosophical points that these two schools have in common and share with each other.

Now with reference to the two main schools with *mahāyāna*, they are the *mādhyamikas* and the *yogācāras*. Of these the latter has further enriched Buddhism with a widely acclaimed system of dialectics, and is one of the best known metaphysical approaches to reality. Its founder Nagarjuna held that reality is two fold: the absolute (*paramārtha*) and relative (*saṃvṛti*, literally meaning, concealed). The former is reality as such, while the latter is reality as it appears to man in ordinary experience. The absolute reality, or the reality as such, is incomprehensible to human reason, and inexpressible in human language, but is experienced directly by one in the state of *nirvāṇa*. The rival schools may accuse Nagarjuna of having deviated from the teachings of the Buddha. But to an objective observer, he is merely elaborating on the theme of *avyākṛtas* in the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha

consistently refused to answer ultimate questions about reality. He maintained that such questions are unanswerable, and he would answer them neither affirmatively nor negatively. Perhaps it is under the inspiration of this silence of the Buddha in this regard, that Nagarjuna developed his system, or rather he was merely explaining the Buddha's silence. So there is good reason to believe that Nagarjuna's system is a natural development of the Buddha's teachings.

The *yogācāra* school concentrated more on the positive aspect of the Buddha's teachings. Traditionally this school is known as a monistic idealism, which denied the reality of the physical world, maintaining that consciousness alone is reality. But the recent studies, including my *A Doctrine of Buddhist Experience*² have interpreted the *yogācāra* school of Buddhism as a pluralistic realism, according to which reality of the physical world is not denied, but is other than how it is known through the ordinary experience. *Yogācārā* then, is for the most part in agreement with the *mādhyamika*. While the *mādhyamikas* say that reality as such is incomprehensible as well as ineffable, *yogācārins* explain how the reality becomes concealed from the ordinary experience. Man's experience of reality in the present state of existence is inevitably in terms of subject and object. A thing is known to him either as a subject or an object of experience, and not otherwise. So reality as experienced by him is necessarily characterized by subjectivity or/and objectivity. But in fact reality as such, taken in itself, is neither a subject nor an object. The subjectivity and objectivity are therefore the mental categories imposed by man on to the reality. He will grasp the reality in its suchness only when he is able to perceive it without using the categories of subjectivity and objectivity, which is possible only in the state of *nirvāṇa*. Here the mutual complementarity of the *mādhyamika* and *yogācāra* schools is obvious.

In relation to the *hīnayāna* school, too, *yogācāra* system should not be regarded as a break-away, but as a natural growth. This may be substantiated by referring to the concept of *ālayavijñāna*, which is certainly an important innovation of the *Yogācāra* school. However, it is not such a new concept as it might appear at first. It is rather a natural development or a new presentation of what was already implied in the *hīnayāna* writings. It was implied there in the theory of "seeds", which was proposed in answer to questions such as: "how are defilements associated with a previous moment

2. *op. cit.*

of consciousness carried over to the next moment of consciousness? How is it possible that a past experience can be recalled in the future? In answering these questions, all of which concern the continuity of the past, present and future, Vasubandhu the author of *Abhidharma-kosa*, following the Sautrantika point of view, drew on the imagery of the seed-fruit relationship and said that the present and the future are determined by the seeds left behind by the past: the seeds of the defilements associated with a previous moment of consciousness are carried over to the next moment of consciousness; the seeds of the past deeds produce their fruits in the future; and the seeds of the past experiences enable one to recall those experiences. Then what the Yogacarins later called *ālaya-vijñāna*, is for all practical purposes just the collection of those seeds of the past determining the present and future behaviour of an individual." (*A Doctrine of Buddhist Experience*, pp. xiii-xiv). Thus there is a direct link between the *hīnanāya* and the *yogācāra* schools, and between them stands the *mādhyamika* one and, therefore, all these three schools can be easily understood as different stages in the development of a single system of thought.

Buddhist Spirit of Co-existence

Buddhism, when it came into contact with other cultures and religions, promptly displayed some of its potentialities, which would have otherwise remained undeveloped. Its encounter with other cultures and religions gave rise also to different forms of Buddhism, each of which on the one hand was an enrichment of Buddhism itself, and, on the other, provided an example of religious co-existence. By religious co-existence I mean not merely religious tolerance. If by religious tolerance we mean rather letting others live according to their religious convictions, by religious co-existence we mean the readiness of two or more religions to be mutually influenced and enriched. Buddhism is then a typical example of a religion that has exhibited throughout its history such a spirit of co-existence. It has always allowed itself to be influenced by other religions, and has also influenced other religions very substantially.

Buddhism started with modest beginnings in the North-Eastern region of India. But soon it spread to the East, conquered the Eastern nations, and even re-shaped the Eastern cultures so that they came to be almost identified with the Buddhist culture. But its approach to the new cultures was not destructive: it was constructive and sympathetic. It advanced by

a process of being influenced by the cultural and religious traditions of the countries it spread to, and creatively influencing the same. The history of Buddhism illustrates how a religion can co-exist with other religions not just by passively tolerating them, but also by creatively enriching them, and also being enriched by them.

We have mentioned that in the beginning Buddhism was intolerant of Brahmanism. But it was an intolerance which helped Buddhism purify itself, and make itself more authentically a religion. This kind of intolerance is part of religious co-existence. That is, the different religions must exercise mutual corrective influence. I would compare the Buddha's approach to Brahmanism with Christ's approach to Judaism. Christ did not want to destroy the Jewish religion, but to reform it and to restore it to its original purity and sublimity. Similarly, the Buddha was helping Brahmanism to regain its original and authentic form. Christ wanted to retain all that was good and positive in Judaism. Similarly, the Buddha, too, retained all that was essentially religious in Brahmanism. For example, he accepted the Brahmanic theory of *karma*, the theory of transmigration, the yogic mysticism, and so on.

There was still another aspect on which the Buddha demonstrated his spirit of religious co-existence. The early form of Buddhism, namely, the *teravāda*, did not have much scope to cater to the religious sentiments of the common people. It was more a system of ethical principles, doctrines and yogic practices. Therefore, theoretically it had very little to do with gods and goddesses, mythological figures. Even so, on a practical level Buddhist literature abounds in mythological narratives from the very beginning. The story of *Māra* is an example of this, which has been made a part of the narrative of the enlightenment of the Buddha. Moreover, *Māra* has now become an accepted symbol of evil in general, and the evil tendencies in man. Similarly, early Buddhist writings present to us an array of heavenly beings such as gods, spirits and demons, each of which is made to serve a purpose with reference to the Buddhist teachings. Thus we find in Buddhism a positive attempt to respect the religious sentiments of the common people brought up in the Hindu context of myths and mythologies.

Again, Buddhism in its *Mahāyāna* form became more and more a theistic religion, drawing inspiration mostly from the Hindu Bhakti tradition. Here we see that Buddhism, which was once so critical of Hinduism, is now allowing itself to be influenced and enriched by the same Hinduism. Here

Buddhism is not just on adjusting itself to Hinduism, nor is it just tolerating the latter. But it is positively opening itself to the wisdom of the Hindu theism. As a result we find the emergence of devotional Buddhism, with the Buddha as the centre of worship. It also developed a theology justifying the popular cults, which again was a clear example of the Hindu influence on Buddhism. An example of this is the theory of the three bodies of the Buddha: the transcendent, historical and heavenly bodies. This doctrine of the three bodies is most probably inspired by the Hindu doctrine of the *trimūrti*. Further, the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha provided, through the belief in the one Absolute, a unification of the complex mythology of the celestial and earthly Buddhas. Thus the *mahāyāna* form of Buddhism blended the varying kind of religious experience: contemplative, devotional and active. Thus in the ideal of a *Bodhisattva* we find the blending of meditation, devotion and compassion.

The result of the Buddhist attempt to enrich itself through inspiration from Hinduism was first of all the formation of the new style of Buddhism called *mahāyāna*, which, although it differed much from the *hīnayāna* Buddhism, was certainly, in the final analysis, an enrichment of Buddhism, as a whole. For it opened up new possibilities for the development of the Buddhist thought and practice. Another important result was that the original antagonism between Hinduism and Buddhism gave way to a spirit of mutual appreciation. The Hindus started thinking of Buddhism more sympathetically and made an effort to understand it. A surprising consequence of this move on the part of the Hindus was that they, at least some of them accepted the Buddha as one of the *avatāras* of Lord Vishnu. Thus today we have the name of the Buddha on the list of the Hindu *avatāras*, and thus through *mahāyāna* Buddhism has become acceptable to the Hindus.

A more significant interaction between Hinduism and Buddhism took place at the time of the great philosopher Sankaracarya. Buddhism had by then developed a very sophisticated philosophy, distinguishing between the phenomenal world and the real world, with a clear stress on consciousness. The great Buddhist dialectician Nagarjuna very cleverly argued, as we have already mentioned, for the ineffability of the ultimate reality, the thing-in-itself, while the *yogācāra* school of Buddhism understood the world of experience in terms of subjectivity and objectivity, which should be transcended so that one may attain reality. It is a synthesis of these highly philosophical ideas that we find in the *advaita* philosophy of Sankara, so that he is often called a 'Buddhist in disguise.' If one remembers the central role that the

advaita philosophy of Sankara has played in Hinduism, one will easily understand how greatly Hinduism has been influenced by Buddhism. And this should be considered a success not only of *mahāyāna* Buddhism but also of the Buddhist movement as a whole. The point is that here the *mahāyāna* Buddhism should be appreciated for making the whole movement acceptable to people belonging to other religious traditions too.

Budhism was further enriched through *mahāyāna*, when it was introduced to countries like China, Japan, Tibet and Burma, and in all these places its potentiality to develop by assimilating newer and newer elements from other cultures and religions was amply proved. In India the dominant note of Buddhism was a contemplative attitude. But reaching those countries, and mingling with the local religious cultures, it took more and more the form of a devotional and active theism. It was probably because of the initiative taken by the Chinese merchants that Buddhism was introduced into their country. The Buddhist stress on calm and peace must have appealed to the Chinese, who were then going through a period of fights and bloodshed. Moreover the readiness on the part of the Buddhists to respect the local religious traditions and practices also was remarkable. As a result of this mutual appreciation there arose a new denomination of Buddhism called the Pure Land Buddhism, which synthesized remarkably well the Buddhist and Chinese elements. On the one hand it may be considered the self-adjustment of Buddhism to make itself suit the Chinese mind and, on the other, it is the most significant contribution of the Chinese to Buddhism. It was founded in the 4th century A.D. Although Chinese in origin, it has its roots in the Indian devotional Buddhism. Its main feature is that merit can be transferred; especially that a Bodhisattva can share his merits with others who place their trust in him. Salvation then, does not depend merely, on one's own power, but on the power of another too. The central figure of devotion in the Pure Land Buddhism is Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. He was probably the object of the popular worship and sentiments for the Chinese, and was now made to appear as a great Bodhisattva. All those who put their trust in him would by his grace inherit his kingdom called the Pure Land.

In Japan Buddhism interacted easily with the indigenous Shintoism as a result of which there arose the most popular form of Buddhism, namely, Zen. However, the deeper roots of Zen are to be sought in the Chinese Taoism. It may be said that Zen originated in China, and was then adopted by Japan where it developed to the present form. The Japanese

word *Zen* means "meditation," and accordingly this particular form of Buddhism is mostly a system of meditation. It brings together the yogic mysticism of Taoism and the nature mysticism of Shintoism. It trains man to transcend the conceptual thinking and the linguistic expressions, and thus to see directly the thing as such, or in other words the suchness (*tathatā*) of things. Here one is trained to think without thought! It is therefore obviously the culmination of a tendency latent in Buddhism from its very beginning. The Buddha had said that the ultimate questions are unanswerable, and that the final state of existence called *nirvāṇa* was ineffable. The *hīnayāna* schools found it difficult to explain how one can have the perception of a thing if it is changing every moment. Later day logicians like Dignaga and Dharmakīrti held that the object of common experience is a mental construct (*kalpanā*), and as such it is called *sāmānya-lakṣaṇa*, while the world of reality as such, called the *sva-lakṣaṇa* is beyond the limits of ordinary experience, and therefore can be realized only through the direct vision in the state of enlightenment. The *Mādhyamika* school, too, presented in forceful terms that the thing-in-itself is incomprehensible as well as inexpressible, and then the *yogācāra* school explained how the reality is distorted by the common man's categories of subjectivity and objectivity so that his understanding of it is far from being true. In the light of this line of development of Buddhist thought, it is easy to see how *Zen* is the natural culmination of it rather than a schism within Buddhism.

Similar analyses may also be made of the forms of Buddhism that developed in Tibet and Burma. In both cases it took new forms in view of the needs of the given contexts rather in denial of the original teachings of the Buddha. In Tibet, for example, the Buddhists accepted the life style of non-celebrate monks, and practised rituals in imitation of the local customs. They even relaxed the principle of *ahimsa* to justify the non-vegetarian food-habits of the Tibetans, and the Tibetan Buddhists without any scruple eat meat for reasons that in the extremely cold climate of Tibet they cannot survive without it, and that vegetation is scarce there. Consequently a Tantric form of Buddhism developed in Tibet, whereby the Tibetans gained certain new dimensions for their traditional religion, while Buddhism attracted many new followers.