

“Universality of Buddhism”

Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti

Dr. Shin’ichi Tsuda has explained in his *Abstract* for the *Panel THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE LOTUS SUTRA*, of which he is the Convener, in a very scholarly and original way, “*an aspect of the Universality of the Lotus Sūtra in its theological character*”, and affirms that “*Since the time of Gautama Siddhartha, Buddhism has consistently had the concept of God as its foundation, and without reaffirmation of that concept, Buddhism cannot convey the real meaning of its philosophy*”. As some of the other members of the Panel have adhered to the theistic conception of Buddhism though based on other arguments, we shall develop here our point of view on this particular matter.

Buddhist Atheism
as judged by Monier-Williams

Our firm idea is that Buddhism is essentially a non-theistic religion from its very beginning and that it has remained atheistic during its full existence; and that the Buddha, Shākyamuni Buddha, any Buddha of the Past, any Buddha of the Future; and any Buddha of the Present, have not been, will never be, and are not a Supreme God, Creator and Governor of the Universe.

Buddhist Atheism has given rise to an example of Western *cultural intolerance* in the past. Many scholars, as for example M. Monier-Williams, belonging to Christian Religion, refused to consider Buddhism as an “*atheistic religion*”, for this mere concept was in itself for them a *contradictio in adiecto*: in their opinion *Religion* in order to be “Religion” has to be *Theistic* as Christianity is –assumed as the only *true Religion* and the unique standard to decide what can be truly called “*Religion*”. Monier-Williams concludes his book *Buddhism*¹ with these words:

“...*Christianity is a religion, whereas Buddhism, at least in its earliest and truest form, is no religion at all...*” (p. 537 of the Indian edition of his book).

¹ *Buddhism, in its connexion with Brāhmanism and Hindūism, and in its contrast with Christianity*, First edition in London, 1889; Indian edition in Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1964.

* This paper was presented at XVIIth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna, August 20, 2014

Sir M. Monier-Williams (1819-1899), who was Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University at England, author of the most widely used Sanskrit-English dictionaries, and one of the first European scholars to publish a complete treatise on Buddhism, under the title of *Buddhism, in its connexion with Brahmanism and Hinduism, and in its contrast with Christianity*, trying to explain in the *Preface* the aim of his book, reveals his own pejorative ideas on Buddhism:

“... *I think I can claim for my own work an individuality which separates it from that of others –an individuality which may probably commend it to thoughtful students of Buddhism as **helping to clear a thorny road, and introduce some little order and coherence into the chaotic confusion of Buddhistic ideas.***” (p. VIII Indian edition). [The bold is ours].

And already in the same *Preface* he acknowledges his confessional “distorted” approach to the interpretation of Buddhism and his lack of sympathy for this religion so different from his “inherited Christianity”:

“... *Lastly, **I have depicted Buddhism from the standpoint of a believer in Christianity**, who has shown, by his other works on Eastern religions, an earnest desire to give them credit for all the good they contain. In regard to this last point, I shall probably be told by some enthusiastic admirers of Buddhism, that **my prepossessions and predilections -inherited with my Christianity- have, in spite of my desire to be just, distorted my view of a system with which I have no sympathy...*** (pp. IX-X Indian edition).” [The bold is ours].

But it is in the last part of the book, *Lecture XVIII, Buddhism Contrasted with Christianity*, that he emphatically affirms, p. 536, that Buddhism “*is no religion at all*”. And to demonstrate this thesis he enumerates the positive tenets of Christianity -which are necessary, according to him, for a Religion could be called “Religion”- and maintains that Buddhism does not possess any of them, and consequently Buddhism is no Religion at all. The first requirement for Monier-Williams is that Religion “*must reveal the Creator in His nature and attributes to His creature, man*”; in other words, to affirm the existence of a Supreme God, Creator and Ruler of the universe, and consequently Buddhism, which is atheistic, cannot be a Religion.

The nature of Religion is thus denied to Buddhism just because it is different from Western religious conceptions. It is difficult to find a more confessional and prejudiced attitude than Monier-Williams’ one in regard to Buddhism.

*Helmuth von Glasenapp's interpretation
of Buddhist Atheism*

Helmuth von Glasenapp (1891-1963), in his already classical book *Buddhismus und Gottessidee*² clearly demonstrates, with his broadminded and careful way of approaching Indology, in this excellent study on Buddhism, the *non-theistic* nature of Buddhism, which does not eliminate from it its *religious character*, and he concludes that:

“The factum that the same objective facts, plus similar intellectual necessities, emotional moods and psychological needs within the same historical period and in the same mental situation may produce totally different dogmatic expressions – this fact cannot be more conclusively proved than by a comparison of the various religions. Most illustrative in this context is a confrontation between Christian and Buddhist teachings, since both highly developed religions seek to bring men to salvation-liberation, and they both have much in common with regards to morality, cult, and forms of organization. They also differ radically precisely in their metaphysical foundations... The central dogma of Western religions (Parsism, Judaism, Christianity, Islamism) is the belief in a personal, transcendent creator and ruler beside whom no other divine being is conceived as active in nature. Buddhism kept the conception of the nature gods of the Indian religions, and also admitted those of other countries it entered, but it sees all devas as bound in saṃsāra. This difference is of secondary importance only, for in the actual teaching of liberation the Buddhist devas have no special place... More important is the difference between Buddhism and the other religions inasmuch as Buddhism does not attribute the creation and ruling of the world to a personal God.”

In fact it would be no necessary to discuss on the basis of written evidence whether *Atheist Buddhism* is or is not a *Religion*; it would be only necessary to observe the

² *Buddhismus und Gottessidee. Die buddhistischen Lehren von den überweltlichen Wesen und Mächten und ihre religionsgeschichtlichen Parallelen*, in *Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz*, 1954, Nr. 8, Wiesbaden: in Kommission bei Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1954 (and Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1966); translated from German into English under the title *Buddhism - a non-theistic religion. With a selection from Buddhist Scriptures*, edited by Heinz Bechert, London: Georg Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1970 (with a *Preface* by Christmas Humphreys); translated from German into Spanish (by Eduardo García Belsunce) under the title: *El Budismo - una Religión sin Dios*, Barcelona: Barral Editores S.A., 1974.

behavior of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and South East Asian Buddhist believers in their visits to their temples to perceive the profound religious feelings that inspires them.

The Buddhist Teachings

There are a great number of Buddhist teachings that oblige in a clear way to accept that the Buddha has not conceived himself, and is not conceived by Buddhists, as a Supreme God. These Buddhist teachings cannot be put aside and their authority cannot be denied.

But before referring to these teachings let us point out a very common Christian tendency to interpret Buddhist Religion.

Inclusivism

We belong to a Christian Culture and many times we have had the occasion to see how strong is the Christian tendency to make Buddhism a religion similar to the Christian one. Many times there is a clear respect and admiration for Buddhism in Christian believers and scholars, and they unconsciously try to “save” Buddhism from the “accusation” of “atheistic”, making it similar to their own religion. They paradoxically adopt what can be called an “*inclusivist*” approach, which is considered by Paul Hacker (wrongly in our opinion) as a characteristic of Indian Culture.

According to Hacker in his posthumous work, “*Inklusivismus*”, in Gerhard Oberhammer’s ed., *Inklusivismus. Eine indische Denkform*, Wien: Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, Occasional Papers 2, 1983, p. 12:

“Inclusivism means that one considers that a central conception of a group alien to one’s own, with its own religious conception or its own cosmivision, is identical with one or the other central conception of the group to which one belongs. In general Inclusivism implies an explicit or implicit form of affirmation that the alien, which is presented as identical with the own, in some way is subordinated or inferior to it”.

Thus *Inclusivism*, according to Hacker, in a certain way tries to make disappear the other’s identity. In the Introduction of 1977 to his *Kleine Schriften* of 1978 Hacker ratifies the facts that he points out in his article on tolerance in India, but concludes it explaining: “*What for the European seems to be tolerance [in Indian Culture], is almost always Inclusivism*”.

Let us mention some simple examples of this special kind of what can be called “*cultural appropriation*”.

One friend of us, an important Spanish Christian theologian and thinker developed the theory of the “*concealed*” God in Buddhism. According to him Buddhism does not teach the existence of a Supreme God in a *manifested* way. “God” is a concealed teaching, an important belief, but it is maintained in secret as a mysterious teaching that because of its importance cannot be *openly revealed*.

Another Spanish scholar, a Christian priest, studied all the Pāli Canon and interpreted its texts one by one, with the aim to demonstrate that in Buddhism there is the idea of the soul, exactly conceived as the Christian one.

A true and sincere Spanish Buddhist believer clearly declared: “*Why people who are not Buddhist and belong to another religion come to us to teach us how Buddhism has to be understood by us.*”

It is obvious that these persons, who explain Buddhism according to their own belief, would never accept at their turn that somebody asks them to change any important tenet of their own religion, and replace it by a principle of the other religion.

The Buddhist texts

Now we shall comment some Buddhist texts that make it impossible to maintain the idea of a God, a Supreme God, Creator and Governor of the World in the Buddhist context, constructed according to Western canons. In the light of the concept just analyzed maintained by Hacker, we could say that to try to adjust Buddhism to other’s religion concept on God would be a case of *inclusivism*. By the way let us say that this atheistic tradition in ancient India is very strong and is shared by a series of non-Buddhist philosophical and religious systems, fully accepted by Hindu orthodoxy, as the Mīmāṃsā, the Sāṃkhya, and the most ancient form of the Yoga.

Infinite number of Buddhas

If it is accepted the Buddha being a Supreme God many non-wanted consequences would occur, as for instance: it is not possible to accept as coherent with the idea of God, the important teaching of the Buddha concerning the possibility opened to everybody that follows the Path to become a Buddha. There have been many Buddhas in the Past, there are many in the Present, and there will be many in the Future.³ Consequently, if

³ See our article “Buddhist Conception of Reality”, published in *Kokoro, Journal of the Essential Lay Buddhism Study Center*, February 2012, pp. 54-58, where we have quoted several Buddhist texts about the infinite number of the Buddhas.

one admits the Buddha being a God, there would be not only “one Supreme God”, Shākyamuni, in Buddhism, but an infinite number of Supreme Gods, what would be difficult to be accepted.

The extraordinarily generous idea consisting in it that *all beings* are able to reach the estate of a Buddha –the great Universal Teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, expressed in the well-known sentence “*all beings will become a Buddha*”, would be eliminated. And all this because of the assimilation of Buddhist tenets to the ideas developed by a Western philosopher or a Western theologian.

*Creation of the World
and the Law of Karman*

Moreover, if the Buddha is considered the Supreme God, He would be the Creator of the World. This is a principal task of any Supreme Being according to Western tradition. Several Buddhist texts clearly explain that the *Bhājanaloka* (the World where humans are born and live) disappears and appears again and again by the force of the accumulated *karman* of all beings. The creation of the World in the Buddhist context is the product of the force of the *karman* of all living beings.⁴ To accept in Buddhism a *Supreme God* instead of *karman* contradicts an important principle of Buddhist Metaphysics.

*Buddha’s own expressions and attitudes
which do not fit with the idea of Him being a God*

The Buddha speaks always to His disciples in a very simple and common way while transmitting to them His Teachings, and he refers to himself in a way that is not appropriate to that of a Supreme Being, but, for instance, to a mere Master.

1. In the celebrated Kālāmas episode in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (*Kesamuttisutta*⁵) I, pp. 188-193 (PTS ed.), Buddha recommends the Kālāma people that, before accepting any teaching transmitted to them, they must submit it to doubt and thoroughly analyse it before making it an object to their adherence; they must not accept it even if it is transmitted by the Scriptures (*piṭakasampadānena*) or even if the person who proclaims that teaching is their own Master.

2. Another important text quoted by Śāntarakṣita and Kamālaśīla (both *circa* 8th century C.E.) is the following one attributed to Buddha himself (in *Tattvasaṃgraha* 3586-3587):

⁴ See our article quoted in the previous note.

⁵ *Kesamutti* or *Kesaputti* is the name of the village where the Kālāma people inhabited.

“As gold is accepted by the experts
after testing it by heat,
cutting and rubbing it with the touch stone,
thus my word, O monks,
is to be accepted by you,
after being carefully examined
- not out of respect for me.”

This rigor recommended by Buddha himself before accepting any of His own Teachings is completely contrary to the attitude logically assigned to a Supreme God, to whom a perfect and correct knowledge is necessary *a priori* attributed, and which constitute the irrefutable Truth that must be accepted by all His believers and followers without any doubt or discussion.

3. The Buddha has not created either any Doctrine, He himself affirms that He is a *mere Discoverer of Truths*, Laws that govern reality and transcend Him, that are there “*either appears or does not appear any Buddha*”. Buddha has not created the World, has not created Reality. He is not a Creator, He is a mere Master who reveals in his Doctrine the Reality and the True nature of things He had discovered by His own effort.

These laws that govern reality, has not been invented by Him, they are not a construction of His mind. Moreover they have not been revealed to Him by another being. In several texts He proudly affirms that He has had no master: *na me ācariyo atthi*. Cf. *Majjhima Nikāya* I (*Ariyapariyesanasutta*), p. 171, *Kathāvatthu*, p. 289; *Mahāvagga*, p. 8; *Milindapañha*, p. 235 (PTS ed.); *Saṅghabhedavastu*, Part I, p. 132.

These laws are there, they have been always there, and Buddha, after an intense and painful intellectual effort, in the memorable moment of his Enlightenment, *discovers* the existence of these laws, their nature and their functioning. And He has full consciousness of his character of mere discoverer of a reality that transcends him and to which He has opened his mind and his receptivity in order to allow it to penetrate into him. And it will be the exposition of these laws what constitutes his Teaching, his Dharma. His Teaching, his Dharma, is thus only the exposition, manifestation, explanation, elucidation, revelation and transmission by him of these laws.

We can say that in the beginning of Buddhist Doctrine there was an intellectual act of knowledge, painfully conquered. From the first moment the importance of knowledge and of human effort has constituted an essential characteristic of Buddhism.

These laws have not been created by Buddha either. They have not been revealed to Him by any superior power or even by any human teacher. They are not a construction of His mind, He has not invented them.

These laws, as the empirical reality that they regulate, exist from a beginningless eternity valid by themselves, always the same, inalterable, necessary, acting with an ineludible force, not being possible for anything to escape the rigor of their dominion.

These ideas are expressed in many texts as:

Samyuktāgama (Nidānasamyukta, Bhikṣusūtra), pp. 164-165:

“The Dependent Origination has been made by the Bhagavant or by others? O Bhikshu, the Dependent Origination has not been made by me [= the Buddha] or by others. Whether Tathāgatas arise or do not arise, stable is that essence of the dharmas [= pratīyasamutpāda], the foundation for the stability of the dharmas. The Tathāgata having known and comprehended it [= pratīyasamutpāda] perfectly by Himself, declares, makes known, establishes, analyzes, reveals, proclaims, teaches, manifests it: given this, occurs that; from the arising of this, that arises, namely the saṃskāras exist having as condition ignorance up to [such] is the origin and destruction [of suffering]”.

The Chinese translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra (Ta chih tu lun)*, p. 298 a, lines 19-20, after quoting the *Bhikṣusūtra*, remarks that the “*law of the arising and destruction, whether the Buddhas exist or not, is eternal*”.

*The Buddhist central principle of nairātmya
or unsubstantiality of the whole reality*

From the very beginning Buddha proclaimed that all that exists is “*unsubstancial*” (*anātman, nairātmya*) that everything is the product of one or several causes, that all is dependent on those causes. Nothing escapes this principle, this causality. This initial idea of the Buddha Teaching reached his pinnacle in the Mādhyamika School of Buddhist Philosophy, but is present all along the History of Buddhist Philosophy. In our book *On Voidness. A Study on Buddhist Nihilism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002 (2nd edition), we have studied several important Buddhist texts that develop the idea that *nairātmya*, “lack of an own being”, “unsubstantiality”, is the universal essence of all existing creatures and things without exception.

The ordinary experience reveals to us a reality composed of beings and things, which present themselves as existing *in se et per se*, as compact, continuous, and unitary, as permanent and as real, i.e. as being such as we perceive them.

The *Mādhyamika* School of Buddhism, founded by Nāgārjuna at the beginning of the Common Era, studies the reality we perceive and reaches the conclusion, regarding that reality, completely different from our ordinary experience. The empirical reality is composed of beings and things absolutely contingent. In this empirical reality, in which we live, there is nothing existing *in se et per se*, nothing has a being that belongs to it by own right (*sva-bhāva*); in this reality everything is conditioned,⁶ relative,⁷ dependent, contingent. Moreover everything without exception is constituted by parts.⁸ No entity exists as a whole; there are only ensembles, conglomerates of parts, elements, constituting factors.⁹ Besides that, nothing is permanent, inalterable; everything is in a process of change, submitted to an evolution, which proceeds under the sign of decay and deterioration. And, as a consequence of what precedes, there is nothing which exists truly as it manifests itself before us (substantial, compact, etc.). The empirical reality, as we perceive it, is thus only an appearance to which nothing real corresponds, something similar to a dream, a mirage, to an illusion created by magic.

The conditionedness, the relativity, the dependence on another, the composedness, the impermanency, in a word, the *contingency*, is the true nature, the true form of being of the empirical reality and the form under which this reality appears to us is only an unreality, an illusion. Thus the ordinary experience is the opposite of the conclusion to which arrives the philosophical study of the perceptible world done by the *Mādhyamika* School.

Many Western thinkers have deduced, from the contingency of the world, the existence of a non-contingent supreme principle, God. Cf. for example, in *The existence of God. A debate between Bertrand Russell and Father F.C. Copleston S.J.*, in Bertrand

⁶ Everything comes forth through the cooperation of a series of causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*).

⁷ A thing is *high* in relation to another one that is *low* in regard to it; a person is a *father* in relation to his *son* and *viceversa*. In the same way as “high”, “low”, “father”, “son” exist, so exist everything in the empirical reality.

⁸ A rope is composed by threads; each thread by filaments and so on. Man is only a conglomerate of material elements which form the body, and of sensations, perceptions, volitions, acts of consciousness. In the same way as the rope and man are only conglomerates of parts, so everything is in the empirical reality.

⁹ One of the great theses of Buddhism is that the whole as such does not exist, that only the parts exist, and the parts at their own term can be analyzed into other parts, and so on. Cf. in Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, “Dignāga’s Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti”, in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Bimal K. Matilal, Dordrecht; Holland/Boston: USA, Reidel, June, 1982, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 105-134, note 6, in page 129, and in *Being as Consciousness. Yogācāra Philosophy of Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004, pp. 1-51, the expression of this idea carried out to an extreme maintained by Buddhist Idealism, and also in our edition of the Sanskrit text of *The Avayavinirākaraṇa of Paṇḍita Aśoka*, published in Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1994, the same idea appears, but maintained by a late Buddhist author, who belongs to the realistic tradition of old Buddhism.

Russell, *Why I am not a Christian and other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, London: Unwin Books, 1967, p. 139, the Christian argument for extracting from contingency the idea of God is well expressed by Father Copleston :

“Well, for clarity sake, I’ ll divide the argument (for contingency) in distinct stages. First of all, I should say, we know that there are at least some beings in the world which do not contain in themselves the reason for their existence. For example, I depend on my parents, and now on the air, and on food and so on. Now, secondly, the world is simply the real or imagined totality or aggregate of individual objects, none of which contain in themselves alone the reason for their existence. There isn’t any world distinct from the objects which form it, any more than the human race is something apart from the members. Therefore, I should say, since objects or events exist, and since no object of experience contains within itself the reason of its existence, this reason, the totality of objects, must have a reason external to itself. That reason is its own existence, or is not. If it is, well and good. If it is not, then we must proceed further. But if we proceed to infinity in that sense, then there’s no explanation of existence at all. So, I should say, in order to explain existence, we must come to a being which contains within itself the reason for its own existence, that is to say, which cannot not-exist.”

Bertrand Russell, adopting an atheistic philosophical position, negates Copleston’s arguments, and many centuries before him in India the great Buddhist philosopher, Nāgārjuna, and his School, had a thoroughly different way of thinking, which brings Buddhist idea of *contingency* to its highest possible level. He affirms also like Christian thinkers *contingency* of the whole reality, but from this fact does not draw the conclusion that a non-contingent supreme principle, God, exists. For Nāgārjuna the *universal contingency* has had no-beginning, is *anādi*,¹⁰ and, consequently, is irrelevant to ask, *when, how* or *why* it began. The hypothesis of a *beginningless contingency* has the same function in Nāgārjuna than the idea of a *beginningless or eternal God* has in Western thinkers, as Copleston.

¹⁰ Cf. Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, “*Anāditva*, or beginninglessness in Indian Philosophy”, in *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, pp. 1-20: one of the fundamental principles in Indian Philosophy is the notion of *anāditva* i.e. the fact that there exist some basic instances of thought and of reality that have not had beginning in time, so to say: ‘they come from an eternity without beginning’. They are *anādi*, for example, *saṃsāra* or reincarnations of existences, *pratītyasamutpāda* or arising in dependence, *ālayavijñāna* or deposit-consciousness, the series of causes and effects, Voidness, time, etc.

Both thinkers, a Western thinker and a Buddhist thinker, in their explanations of *universal contingency* have recourse to what their own cultures offer them as an *a priori* principle of reason, as a rational argument. In our comparative studies of Western and Indian Philosophies we have called these principles: the *cultural dogmas* proper of each culture: In Western Philosophy, the idea of an eternal Supreme Being, God, who acts as a first motor in order to produce or create the whole contingent reality, and, in Indian Philosophy, the idea of *beginninglessness* or *anāditva*: contingency has had no beginning, it is now as it was before and as it will be in the future. Both explanatory principles must be accepted as relevant for each culture, without trying to impose on the other Culture a Principle that is proper to one Culture.

Conclusion

We think that these inclusivist attitudes that try to explain a culture through the tenets of another culture or to transform one into the other, involve the possibility of a *theoretical violence*, as is seen in the Monier-Williams' words and attitudes on Buddhism as a Religion; and also have derived in the past in openly *violent actions*, as those performed by the Catholic Inquisition in Goa, one of the most cruel in the history of this abominable institution, because of the lack of understanding and accepting the differences showed by the Buddhist and the Hindu Religions in relation to the Christian Religion.

Fundación Instituto de Estudios Budistas, FIEB, Buenos Aires