

An Inquiry into Likelihood of Religious Pluralism in Buddhism

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Religious pluralism goes far beyond tolerance

The world's religions usually stress that the teaching they believe in is the most reliable. To corroborate their supremacy, they criticize and reject the philosophies and practices of the other religions. For instance, "this is the only truth and another is untruth".¹ This rejection is widely ranged and multifaceted. In this regard, some recent scholars have proposed two different concepts: religious tolerance and pluralism. It is more complicated defining 'religious tolerance'. The Webster dictionary defines the term tolerance: "willingness to accept feelings, habits, or beliefs that are different from your own."² It renders that religious tolerance has to be defined as the willingness to accept religious beliefs. For this, B. A. Robinson defines the term as "not respecting the fundamental human right of other people to hold religious beliefs that are different from your own."³ Thus, an active participation in refusing the right to believe or practice of other religious followers can be defined as religious intolerance. Religious tolerance does not imply that a religion accepts what opposing religions teach. There are different definitions in terms of the term "religious pluralism" that can be traced as Robinson collected; "Religious diversity", "at least some truths and true values exist in other religions", "Religions converge on a single truth" etc. In brief, I believe that the term "religious pluralism" is a deeper concept than religious tolerance and discusses multiple truths or common validities among the religions.

As we discussed above, it is obvious that tolerance and pluralism are two different concepts. In the Sutta pimaka, there are considerable references regarding both of these concepts. Sometimes, the references, which have been already recognized under religious tolerance, also constitute the hints in relation to religious pluralism. Therefore, I intend to refer both well-known and newly found references of corroborating the Buddhist perspectives towards religious pluralism. Particularly, it should be noted that the range of religious tolerance in Buddhism is wider than religious pluralism. Even though the Buddha was the most familiar religious teacher to the rulers like King Kosala, Bimbisâra, Ajâsatta, Candapajjota, Udena etc., there was never a single effort made by the Buddha or his disciples to use political force against other religions. It attests how Buddhist culture practiced religious tolerance in the Buddha's period. Nevertheless, as the commentaries note the Niganmhas⁴ who highly practiced non-violence could not tolerate the teachings and the success of Buddhist missionary and they made a few conspiracies against the Buddha and his disciples.⁵ Thus, there is no doubt the religious tolerance in Buddhism is a well taught practice. The intellectual criticisms, commonly practiced by Sramana tradition towards other religions, should not be taken as religious intolerance.

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Brahmanic tradition and Pluralism

The religious pluralism in Buddhism is primarily based on Sramanic tradition. The Brahmanic tradition as existed in the 6th century BCE was entirely opposed to the doctrine introduced by Buddhism. It does not mean that the Buddha abominated Brâhmanâs. He used to visit Brâhmanâs and had friendly talks. Tevijja, Cankî and Sonadada were some of them. In the Suttas, though these BrâhmaGâs attempted to put forward pluralistic features between Buddhism and Brahmanism, the Buddha turned away their views straightway. For instance, while Sonadana gives five reasons why he decided to see the Buddha and discuss, the Buddha logically rejected Sonadana's facts and suggested five different practices.⁶ This discussion found on the Sonadana sutta implies that there are no pluralistic features between Buddhism and Brahmanism. Moreover, the *Cankî sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikâya* contains the facts that the Buddha rejected the truth and the theory of knowledge that Brahmanism had introduced.⁷ Especially, the divine revelation that was the ultimate teaching in Brahmanism was rejected by the Buddha in the discussion with BrâhmaGa Tevijja.⁸ In this respect, it is clear that though Buddhism practiced tolerance towards Brahmanism, it did not hold even a nominal point regarding Pluralism.

Sramanic tradition and Pluralism

The Sramanic tradition emerged in India as a non-organized group that opposed Brahmanism. Its non-organizational form led to the rise of a number of sub-groups in the Sramanic tradition itself. Consequently, as the Pali cannon notes, the number of the religious groups in India increased up to sixty two (62).⁹ However, the teachings of the Sramanas fundamentally focused on rejecting the omnipotent Brahma and creationism. Basically, Sramanic groups present religious pluralistic teachings because their mutual destination was to discover the truth through oneself while rejecting the concept of Brahma. The Sramanic groups were mainly divided into two, in accordance with their views as externalism and annihilations. By practice, they followed self-mortification and self-indulgence. But, Buddhism avoided both, externalism and annihilations and discovered the middle path, presenting a non-soul theory that made an identity for Buddhism among all the Sramanic groups.

Buddhist pluralism and Anihilationism

There is no doubt, Buddhism rejects both extremes in terms of understanding the ultimate truth. But, after having a careful study of the Suttas and their commentaries, a few facts found that implied different Buddhist attitudes towards the practitioners of the two extremes. Relatively, Buddhism respects the self-mortification practitioners more than self-indulgence, though the Buddhist critique directs to two extremes. In this regard, my probe mainly focuses on an account of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. This Sutta is known to be the first sermon of the Buddha, and it defines the practices of two extremes. The identical features found amongst these two definitions are “innoble” (*anariyo*) and “unproductive” (*anattasaChito*). The term “*dukkho*” is especially applied as an adjective for self-mortification and three terms¹⁰ in sequence “low” (*hîno*), “vulgar” (*gammo*), and “belonged to untrained”¹¹ (*pothujjaniko*) describe self-indulgence. According to the above facts, it is certain that the descriptive definition conjoined with the term “*attakilamatânuyoga*” (self-mortification) does not indicate that it was seriously condemned. But, three terms applied for “*kâmasukhallikânuyoga*” (the self-indulgence) clearly enunciate that Buddha badly criticized the practices which nihilists practiced. In other words, Buddhist attitudes towards the self-mortification practitioners was more positive than towards the nihilists. The reason for this different attitude as the commentary of the *Majjhima-nikâya* has given is that eternalism is less censurable and the annihilationism are highly censurable.¹² According to the further explanation of the commentary of the *Majjhima-nikâya*, this difference was made based on the views and ethics followed these two extremes. The self-mortification practitioners practice wholesome fearing unwholesome practices, because they believe in this world and the next world, and the result of the actions (*Kamma*).¹³ This indicates that certain values and ethical practices practiced by eternalists are comparatively appreciated by Buddhism.¹⁴ Therefore the pluralism in Buddhism at that time almost can be limited to the Sramanic groups which practiced self-mortification in India.

Fundamental Pluralistic concepts in Buddhism

¹⁰ Yo câyaC kâmesu kâmasukhallikânuyogo hîno gammo pothujjaniko anariyo anattasaChito, yo câyaC attakilamatânuyogo dukkho anariyo anattasaChito, L. Feer, *SaCyutta-nikâya*, ed. vols. V., 420.

¹¹ The term “*pothujjana*” is rendered to be ‘one of the many folk’, ‘worldling’, ordinary man, (Buddhist Dictionary), As the dictionaries note the average people who have not entered even to the beginning stage of eight noble stages are called as *pothujjana*. But, this term appears in a different context in the Pali canon. Here the matter that should be seriously inquired is why the Buddha uses the term “*pothujjanika*” for the self-indulgence practitioners. If this term gives merely the meaning as “average or ordinary person”, could it be taken that the self-mortification practitioners are non-average or non-*pothujjanas*? So, it is clear that the term “*pothujjana*” in this context does not mean the average or ordinary people. It may have been applied to define drastically the people who did not care about even the basic ethics. In other words, this term may refer to the people who were not trained in basic ethics. Thus, I would opt to interpret “*pothujjaniko*” as “belonged to untrained” (I give here my regards to Mr. Aruna K Gamage. Once he brought this point into one of our personal discussions two years back, but I am not updating to refer his suggestion at this moment)

¹² Ettha ca sassatadassanaC appasâvajjaC dandhavirâgaC, ucchedadassanaC mahâsâvajjaC khippavirâgaC, I. B. Horner, *Majjhimanikâya ammahakathâ (Papañcasûdanî)*. eds. vols. III. (London: Pali Text Society, 1976), 205.

¹³ Sassatavâdî hi idhalokaC paralokañca atthîti jânâti, sukata dukkamânaC phalaC atthîti jânâti, kusalaC karoti, akusalaC karonto bhâyati, ibid

¹⁴ But, the second side of the definition given by the commentator, which is clearly based on the intellectual part of these two views, enunciates a reversed opinion. As it notes, it is easier to pull out the views of the annihilationists than of eternalists.

¹⁵ W. L. Todd, *The Ethics of ÆaEkara and Úântideva - A Selfless Response to an Illusory World*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 3-4

¹⁶ P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: Theosophical Publication Society, 1909.), 86p

¹ Idameva saccaC moghamaññaC, V. Trenckner, *Majjhima-nikâya*, vols. I (London: Pali Text Society, 1993), 483.

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tolerance>

³ <http://www.religioustolerance.org/relintoll.htm#dict>, 2009-APR-21

⁴ As I understand, the NigaGmhas who followed the doctrine of Mahâvîra were not completely the same as traditional Jains. Hence, I recognize the Jains as a different group from the group of Mahâvîra. Besides, I believe the Jains also practiced non-violence like or beyond how Buddhism practiced.

⁵ H. C. Norman, *Dhammapada ammahakathâ*, Vol. III., (London: Pali Text Society, 1994), 475-6

⁶ T. W. Rhys Davids, and J. E. Carpenter, *Dîgha-nikâya*. eds. vols. I, (London: Pali Text Society 1975), 119 -123.

⁷ “KiC pana, bhâradvâja, atthi koci brâhmaGânaC ekabrâhmaGopi yo evamâha – ‘ahametaC jânâmi, ahametaC passâmi. Idameva saccaC, moghamaññaC”nti? “No hidaC, bho gotama” V. Trenckner, *Majjhima-nikâya*, Vol. II

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⁸ Teva tevijjâ brâhmaGâ evamâhaCsu – ‘yaC na jânâma, yaC na passâma, tassa sahyatâya maggaC desema. Ayameva ujumaggo ayamañjasâyano niyyâniko, niyyâti takkarassa brahmasahabyatâyâ”ti. T. W. Rhys Davids, and J. E. Carpenter, *Dîgha-nikâya*. eds. vols. I 238.

⁹ Yâni cimâni dvâsammi dimmhitâni brahmajâle bhaGitâni; imâ nu kho, bhante, dimmhiyo kismiC sati honti, kismiC asati na hontî”ti? L. Feer, *SaCyutta-nikâya*, ed. vols. IV., (London: Pali Text Society, 1990), 286.

It should be noted that Buddhism should not be seen as a teaching which emerged suddenly. It was the highest result of the gradual evolution of the Sramanic tradition. Thus, the pluralistic religious concepts appearing in Buddhism is not an astonishment. The concept “non-soul” (*anatta*) is the predominant discovery in Buddhism. In this regard, I came across a slightly different angle from the sources of Dr. Todd and Iyengar. Todd has convincingly shown that there is a way of viewing Advaita Vedānta as offering a view which also denies the soul (jīvatman) as ‘individuated self’.¹⁵ And, illustrating the Advaita, Iyengar says that when the consciousness is released from the bounding adjuncts of matter and mind, there is no more duality, no more relativity, all is one and one is the Self.¹⁶ However, the living time of daEkara is known as 8th century CE.¹⁷ Though the later Vedantic masters reached to such district, Buddhism is acknowledged as the first Sramanic group which offered the theory of non-soul. **Three universal characteristics:** In the three universal characteristics, the “*anatta*” is the last. The concept “impermanence” (*anicca*) and “suffering” (*dukkha*) are not understood to be identified concepts in Buddhism because they were already existing. Non-Buddhist religious leaders, belonging to Sramanic tradition, also focused on understanding the “suffering” and ‘impermanence.’ But, they could not discover the true path to overcome the *anicca* and *dukkha*, and representing different views as they had understood according to their knowledge. In this regard, a more relevant reference is the discussion between the Buddha and Acela Kassapa. In the *Acelakassapa sutta* of the *SaCyutta-nikāya*, Kassapa wanted to make clear doubtful thoughts referring to the concept of the *dukkha*. He inquired the Buddha asking questions if the suffering is made by oneself, others, both or neither oneself nor others.¹⁸ The form of the questions above indicates that Acela Kassapa was aware of the concept of *dukkha*. The significance was that non-Buddhist Sramanas understood the concept of the *dukkha* with the theory of the soul. In addition to that, the Jain texts also note clearly that they focused to search for an extinguishment for *dukkha*.¹⁹ With this reference, it is obvious that the concept of *dukkha* was a fundamental understanding for the Sramanas, especially, because they all practiced to renounce. In a philosophical aspect, referring to both Advaita and the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Todd points out that this distinction would apply even to Advaita Vedānta, for the belief in a self of any kind increases egoism (ahaCkāra), which thus increases one’s suffering.²⁰ Hence, it is clear that the most trustworthy way found by Buddhism to overcome the suffering imposed an identity for Buddhism.

The impermanence was also a well-known teaching realized by Sramanas. In terms of

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adi_Shankara, 16, September, 2015

¹⁸ “KiC nu kho, bho gotama, ‘sayaCkataC dukkha’nti? ‘Mā hevaC, kassapā’ti bhagavā avoca. ‘KiC pana, bho gotama, paraCkataC dukkha’nti? L. Feer, *SaCyutta-nikāya*, ed. vols. II 19

¹⁹ Here, I pick out the most dependable source because somebody may have suspicions regarding the reference like that this sermon was later than Buddhism. This is a citation from a discussion of one of the followers of Parsvanatha and a follower of Mahāvīra. And then it is reliable to admit this as contemporary to Buddha’s period because one of the debaters was a follower of Pārúvanātha. See this sarīra-māGase dukkhe-bajjhamāGāGa pâGiGC khemaC sīvamaGābāhaC-mhāGaC kiC mannasīmunī, J. Charpentier, *Uttarādhyayana*. ed. (Uppsala, 1922), 23-80

²⁰ W. L. Todd, *The Ethics of ĀeEkara and Ūāntideva - A Selfless Response to an Illusory World*, 78

describing this point, I mainly focus on the *Araka sutta* of the *Anguttara-nikaya*. This sutta is the most important reference to affirm that Buddhism contains the pluralistic teaching with Sramanic traditions. It delivers the teachings about the impermanence of beings with a few beautiful smiles. The teachings offered by the Buddha in this sutta were not his own. They were quotations from the ancient ford-makers (*titthakarā*).²¹ In an inquiry into the name of the ford-maker, Araka, can be recognized to be a former Jain leader because his name appears as “Ara” in the list of the names of former Jain leaders. And, the teaching found on this sutta runs parallel to the “*dumapattaya*” chapter of the *Uttarajjhaya* which was one of four canonical Mūla texts. Thus, the content of the *Araka sutta* attests that this teaching was cited from the Jain teachings by the Buddha to make his disciples understand impermanence clearly. In this respect, no doubt, Buddhism comprises pluralistic teachings, especially, to the Sramanic tradition in the 6th century BCE. However, it should be noted here that though *dukkha* and *anicca* of the three universal characteristics in Buddhism were identical to the Sramanic tradition, the non-soul theory (*anatta*) the third, was the identified teaching in Buddhism. Aside from the three universal characteristics, at times, even the stylistic theory of causation also found in the Jain canon.²²

Pluralistic values and Moral trainings

In addition to the fundamental teachings in Buddhism, there are a number of religious pluralistic admissions in Buddhism that are mostly run across in other Sramanic groups. Here, I would limit the numbers of the examples for the clarity of this paper. One of other emblematic practice, “renunciation” (*nekkhama*), was also identical for all the Sramanic groups. The direction of moral practices (sīla) sometimes took an extreme form with their beliefs like not to eat meat and practicing loving kindness up to non-violence (avihiCsā) fundamentally. Eventually, their moral practices were produced up to four restraints (cātuyamasaCvara) in Jainism. The contemplation (*samādhi*) also was not a new practice from Buddhism, as the ascetic Siddhartha practiced it under the instructions of Uddaka and Ālāra.²³ In a deep study it can be recognized that the concept of the Buddha, Pacceka Buddha and Arahant were also common to Sramanic tradition.²⁴ Moreover, the attitude towards the Brāhmanas was also paralleled in the Sramanic tradition.^{25,26} Kammu Gābamba Go hoi- kammu Gāhoi Khattio Furthermore, some of the characters found in the Pali canon are running parallel to the Sramanic groups not only like Jainism, but to the Brahmanic literature too. For instance, King Nami found in the

²¹ Arakassa kho pana, bhikkhave, satthuno anekāni sāvakasatāni ahesuC. Arako satthā sāvakānaC evaC dhammaC deseti – appakaC, brāhmaGa, jīvitaC manussānaC parittaC lahukaC bahudukkhaC bahupāyāsaC mantāyaC boddhabbaC, kattabbaC kusalaC, caritabbaC brahmacariyaC, natthi jātassa amaraGaC., E. Hardy, *AEguttara-nikāya*. ed. vols. IV., (London: Pali Text Society, 1994), 136

²² Jahā aGappabhavo balāgā- aGaC balāgappabhavaC jahā yaevameva mohāyayaGaC khu taGhā- mohaC ca taGhāyayaGaC vayantirāgo ya doso viya kamma biyaC-kammaC va mohappabhavaC vayanti kammaC va jāimaraGassa mūlaC- dukkaC va jāimaraGaC vayanti, J. Charpentier, *Uttarādhyayana*, 32- 6,7

²³ V. Trenckner, *Majjhima-nikāya*, vols. I 163

²⁴ S. Vijitha Kumara, *Jaina Uttarādhyayanaya Piṭibanda Sāhityātmaka hā Vāgvidyātmaka Adyāyanayak* (PhD dissertation) (Colombo: USJP, 2013), 22

²⁵ KammuGā bambaGo hoi- kammuGāhoi Khattio Vaisso kammuGā hoi- suddo havai kammuGā, J. Charpentier, *Uttarādhyayana*, 25-33 This verse is running parallel to the verse in the Suttanipāta Na jaccā vasalo hoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmaGo;Kammunā vasalo hoti, kammunā hoti brāhmaGo”ti. Dines Andersen and Helmer Smith, *Suttanipāta*, ed., (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1913), 24

²⁶ S. Vijitha Kumara (PhD dissertation) 22 / 85-89

²⁷ J. Charpentier, *Uttarādhyayana*, chap. 9

²⁸ R. Dalal, *Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2010), “Arimhanemi”

Cakkavattisihanâda sutta of the *Dîgha-nikaya*, *Makhâdeva sutta* and the *Isigili sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikâya*, and the *Jâtaka*.²⁶ The Same King Nemi is found in Jainism, especially in the *Nami pravrajâ* of the *Uttharajjhaya*.²⁷ Also King Nami is again encountered in the *Vedic* literature.²⁸

Conclusion

As I have discussed above, this paper primarily defined that religious tolerance is different than religious pluralism. And, in applying these two concepts, religious tolerance and pluralism, it was confirmed that the range of Buddhist pluralism does not touch Brahmanism. Brahmanism experiences Buddhist tolerance only. If someone believes that tolerance and pluralism are the same, then the above definitions would be changed. I, in this paper, affirm that the Buddhist Pluralism is limited to the Sramanic tradition only. Nevertheless, the Buddhist attitude towards two different Sramanic practices, self-mortification and self-indulgence, was different in accordance with the facts manifested in the Suttas. The worst unethical practices of the annihilationist were badly criticized by the Buddha, though he held a slight positive attitude towards the self-mortification practitioners. Moreover, except for the concept non-soul theory, almost all other teachings of Buddhism have taken the same form like Sramanic tradition. Simply, it does not imply that Buddhism hesitates to criticize the extreme in order to corroborate the Middle path.

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