

World View and Theory in Indian Philosophy

Edited by
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Buddhist Thought *Versus* Brahmanical Thought

JOHANNES BRONKHORST

Roughly until the middle of the first millennium CE, an important general distinction opposed Buddhist and Brahmanical philosophical thought in the South Asian subcontinent: Buddhist philosophers were of the opinion that our common sense world is not ultimately real, Brahmanical philosophers were convinced that it is. During a number of centuries, all Buddhist philosophers denied the reality of the world of our everyday experience, and all Brahmanical philosophers accepted it.

This striking distinction between Buddhist and Brahmanical philosophies raises an intriguing question. How is it to be explained? Nothing in the teaching of the Buddha as traditionally handed down suggests that ordinary reality does not exist. This idea was introduced later into the Buddhist tradition and subsequently preserved. Why? Was there perhaps a non-philosophical reason behind the Brahmanical attachment to ordinary reality, and for the Buddhist inclination to do away with it? Why were these Buddhists so determined to prove the illusory nature of ordinary experience?

The thesis I wish to explore in this paper is that indeed not only philosophical reasons are behind this great divide. Before exploring possible explanations of this divide, however, it will be necessary to establish that it existed. To do so, I have to recall very briefly some known facts about the early history of Indian philosophy.

To begin with Brahmanism, it is well-known that the first mention of Vedānta (or Vedāntism) as a philosophical school dates from the sixth century CE, when it is referred to by the Buddhist thinker Bhavya. Before that time, other philosophical schools debated with each other. Vedānta did not participate in these debates, nor was it criticised by others. The only sensible conclusion one can draw is that Vedānta did not exist as a philosophical school at that time.

Other Brahmanical philosophical schools did exist during that period. Two ontologies in particular were widely discussed: Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya. Variants of these were used in the texts of Nyāya and Yoga. We cannot enter into details, but note that these two ontologies looked upon the world and the objects it contains as really existing entities.

In this respect these two ontologies were in striking contrast with Buddhist ontology. The earliest Buddhist ontology was developed in Northwest India, probably by the Sarvāstivādins. This ontology recognised the existence of constituent *dharmas*, but not that of things composed of *dharmas*. The objects of our everyday experience, such as houses and chariots, exist as little as human beings which, too, are thought of as an accumulation (and successions) of *dharmas*. Subsequent Buddhist thinkers—most notably Nāgārjuna—developed proofs to show that the world of our experience does not exist. These proofs had the further consequence of showing that no *dharmas* exist either. A further noteworthy development in Buddhism was the idealism which we associate with Vasubandhu and other thinkers of the Yogācāra school. Whatever the differences between the various Buddhist thinkers, all of them agreed that the world of our experience does not exist as such.

This shows that there was, roughly until the middle of the first millennium CE, a fundamental difference between Buddhist and Brahmanical thought. In spite of all the internal differences and disagreements, all Buddhist philosophers rejected the existence of the common sense world, and all Brahmanical philosophers accepted it. Why?

I announced that the answer to this question may not be philosophical, or not only philosophical. In order to investigate this possibility, let us first look somewhat more closely at what philosophy represents in Buddhism and in Brahmanism. It soon becomes clear that it played different roles in these two traditions.

Buddhist philosophy in its various manifestations is Buddhism, or at any rate Buddhism as learned debaters wished to depict it. Being defeated in a debate by a Buddhist opponent might therefore imply that one had to accept his position and therefore become a Buddhist oneself. The same cannot be said of Brahmanical philosophy in its various manifestations. No one could reasonably claim that Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika are Brahmanism, that they (or one of them) constitute what Brahmanism really is about. Brahmanism is primarily about society and about the role of Brahmins in it. One can adhere to it without feeling in any way bound by Brahmanical philosophy. A Buddhist defeated in a debate with, say, a Sāṃkhya, might become convinced of the truth of the Sāṃkhya philosophy; he would not become a Brahmin for that matter, nor necessarily someone who accepted the Brahmanical vision of society.

In view of this difference, there is a fundamental asymmetry between Buddhist and Brahmanical philosophy, an asymmetry that would make itself felt in debate situations: Brahmins might become Buddhists, but Buddhists could not become Brahmins unless they were already Brahmins. In other words, Buddhists might hope to strengthen their ranks by convincing Brahmins of the superiority of their thought, but Brahmins could not entertain such hopes.

This asymmetry was not just theoretical. We know of Brahmins who converted to Buddhism. Some few examples must suffice. Udbhaṭasiddhasvāmin,

the author of two works called *Viśeṣa-stava* and *Sarvajña-mahêśvara-stotra*, and his brother Śaṅkarasvāmin, author of the *Devatā-vimarśa-stuti*, both of uncertain date, appear to have been Brahmins who converted to Buddhism.¹ Legend claims the same with regard to Aśvaghoṣa and Mātṛceṭa, and modern research supports this at least in the case of the former of these two.² Bāṇa's *Harṣa-carita*, a classical Sanskrit literary work, tells of a hermitage (he does not use the term *āśrama*) in the Vindhya mountains headed by Divākara, a Brahmin of the Maitrāyaṇī branch who had converted to Buddhism; his hermitage was used for scholarly and peaceful debate between followers of all schools imaginable, from Jains to Kṛṣṇa devotees, materialists, followers of Tantra and Vedic ritualists.³ I know on the other hand of no examples of Buddhists who had converted to Brahmanism.

This takes us to another question. Buddhists could not convert to Brahmanism in the ordinary sense: they could not become Brahmins unless they were already Brahmins. One is a Brahmin by birth, not through conversion. So what happened to Brahmins who converted to Buddhism? Could they remain Brahmins? Remember that Brahmanism primarily stands for a social order. Could a Brahmanical convert to Buddhism keep his position in society as a Brahmin while at the same time accepting Buddhist ideas and soteriological ideals?

Some indications suggest that this was indeed possible. The Kashmirian author Śaṅkaranandana leaves no doubt about his Buddhist convictions in his works, yet is consistently referred to as a Brahmin in the Buddhist tradition.⁴ Many of the leading scholars at Nālandā, the great monastery/university of the eastern Ganges valley, came from Brahmin families.⁵ There are also several famous Brahmanical Buddhist authors. Hartmut SCHARFE (2002: 139) enumerates, beside Aśvaghoṣa, the philosophers Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, and the grammarian Candragomin. He further points out that Faxian, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, saw in the monastery at Pāṭaliputra two famous professors of Mahāyāna, Rādhāsvāmin and Mañjuśrī, whom he calls Brahmins; this suggests that they were both Brahmins and Buddhists. SCHARFE also refers to a story told by the Tibetan historian Tāranātha, which tells that the Brahmin Hari-bhadra was defeated in a debate by a Buddhist and, as a result, converted to Buddhism; however, he and his son, who worked as a Buddhist missionary, continued to be called Brahmins. All these cases suggest that a social position as a Brahmin was considered compatible with an intellectual choice for Buddhism.

This conclusion finds support in the fact that Jainism, too, came to have its Brahmins. Especially the Digambaras appear to have accepted this notion.

¹ SCHNEIDER (1993: 12) and (1995); HAHN (2000).

² JOHNSTON (1984, II: xviii). Cf. HARTMANN (1987: 216).

³ SCHARFE (2002: 163).

⁴ ELTSCHINGER (2006).

⁵ SCHARFE (2002: 139, n. 45), with a reference to MISRA (1998: 282–302).

Jinasena's *Ādi-purāṇa*, for example, states in so many words that Bharata, the son of the Jina called Ṛṣabha, gave the title *dvija* ('twice-born') to a number of particularly virtuous devotees. He thus justifies and testifies to the existence of Brahmins among the Jainas.⁶ Prabhācandra's *Nyāya-kumuda-candra*, too, does so.⁷ It must further be noted that in modern India one can be Brahmin and Christian at the same time.⁸

Our reflections so far emphasise the asymmetry between Brahmanism and Buddhism during the period that concerns us. They do not yet explain why Buddhists should reject common sense experience as corresponding to reality while Brahmins did not. More clarity may be obtained by considering the social roles which the two played at that time.

Brahmins and Buddhists were in competition with each other. One of the ways in which this competition manifested itself was the debate, in which thinkers confronted each other. These debates were fundamental to the development of Indian philosophy, and were to a considerable extent responsible for the different positions elaborated.

The most important debates took place, at least ideally, at the royal court.⁹ Debates were therefore more than just philosophical events; they were also political events in the sense that the winner of a debate and his school might profit greatly from the victory, while the loser might lose all, including his life.

The court, then, played a central role (whether real or imagined) in the development of Indian philosophy. What was the role of Brahmins and Buddhists at the royal court? Asking this question brings to light another asymmetry between these two groups.

⁶ JAINI (1979: 289 f.).

⁷ DUNDAS (1991: 172 f.).

⁸ See, e.g., DAS (2005: 89): 'In einem 1892 publizierten Buch, das Aufsätze der Jahre 1887–1889 vereint, berichtet Bhudev Mukhopadhyay über seine Begegnung mit einem tamilischen Christen, der stolz darauf war, ein Brahmane zu sein. Obwohl bereits sein Urgrossvater Christ gewesen sei, habe die Familie nie andere als Brahmanen geheiratet. Gegenwärtig sei er zu einem Tempelfest in Tanjore unterwegs, wo die Familie ab und zu die dort üblichen Verehrungsrituale der Gottheiten (*pūjā*) ausführe, denn schliesslich habe man nur die Religion gewechselt, nicht aber die Kaste.' BAYLY (1999: 18): 'In south India it is common to encounter Christians who take pride in Brahman ancestry, and until recently many north Indian Muslims identified with the caste ideals of the lordly Rajput. Furthermore, as James Laidlaw has shown, most of the powerful north Indian traders who follow the austere anti-Brahmanical Jain faith are as insistent as their Hindu neighbours on the importance of marrying within named Vaishya merchant jatis, while simultaneously claiming descent from converts of princely Rajput caste.' In 2004 the journalist Edward LUCE and his wife 'dropped in for tea at the home of a well-known Goan Catholic author. . . . I naïvely asked her whether there was any Portuguese blood in the family. "Oh no, that is out of the question", she said. "Our family is Brahmin."' (LUCE (2006: 311)).

⁹ BRONKHORST (2007).

The Brahmins, to begin with, had a long tradition of offering services to kings. The services they offered took primarily two forms: ritual support and political advice. It is not necessary to enter into details. Vedic ritual offered the kind of magical protection that no king might wish to do without. And the political advice that we find in Brahmanical works like the *Artha-śāstra* and the *Manu-smṛti*—not to speak of numerous other texts, among them the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—was no doubt of the greatest utility for rulers faced with the political reality of their days.

The Buddhists had nothing comparable on offer. They had very little in terms of ritual, and even less in terms of useful political advice. The few Buddhist texts of political advice that have survived—asccribed to the likes of Mātṛceṭa and Nāgārjuna—are totally impractical, and do little beyond counselling the king to be good, and if that does not work, to become a monk.

The Buddhists of that time were obviously aware of their shortcomings in the realm of political counselling, for they left this job to Brahmins. Buddhists started depicting society and their own history in Brahmanical terms. This is clear from the fact that, from the time they started using Sanskrit (itself a major concession to Brahmanism), Buddhists started depicting the good kings of their own past—the father of the Buddha, the Buddha himself in earlier lives—as ideal Brahmanical kings.

Buddhists might henceforth still be heard at the royal courts, but hardly in order to solve problems connected with the daily running of a kingdom. Theirs was a different domain, the domain of spiritual well-being, rebirth and ultimately liberation, and they accepted this.

In this situation it would hardly have been appropriate for Brahmins to argue that the everyday world of the king, the world in which he had to stay in control, in which he might have to combat neighbouring kingdoms or survive revolts, did not really exist. Quite on the contrary, the Brahmins were there to advise him in the world of political reality, to keep him in power, and to allow him to extend his sovereignty. Their philosophy, if they had to engage in philosophical debate, was a philosophy that was solidly anchored in the reality of the ordinary world, because that was the world in which Brahmins made themselves useful. The Buddhists, on the other hand, played on the spiritual sentiments of the ruler, his fear of death, his concern about future lives. They defended positions in which the reality of the present world was denied, in which thinkers were led to abandon, at least in thought, this everyday world.

This, then, is the explanation I propose for the great philosophical divide between Brahmins and Buddhists until roughly the middle of the first millennium CE. It does not answer all questions, and indeed, it would be unrealistic to expect that it would explain more than some broad tendencies. Two major questions in particular demand our attention.

The first of these two questions is related to the suggestion that debates between Buddhists and Brahmins may not, or hardly, have taken place before the

middle of the first millennium. This is the suggestion made, with much caution, by Vincent ELTSCHINGER (2012) in his thought-provoking contribution to this volume ('Apocalypticism, Heresy and Philosophy'). ELTSCHINGER is certainly right in observing that, with few exceptions, philosophical texts from before this date do not usually criticise thinkers across the line dividing Brahmanism and Buddhism. Really polemical literature starts later; ELTSCHINGER (2012) mentions the Mīmāṃsaka Kumārilabhaṭṭa in particular as an early, and fierce, critic of Buddhism. What is more, ELTSCHINGER (2012) argues convincingly that the period following the collapse of the Gupta empire saw increased animosity between Brahmins and Buddhists. Our claim to the extent that the competing positions of these two movements are responsible for at least some of their philosophical views might be considered to be threatened by these observations.

I do not think it is. The opposition between Brahmins and Buddhists may have been less fierce during the centuries preceding Kumāriḷa, it is yet clear that the two did not develop in isolation. This can be shown in a variety of ways. Most striking, perhaps, is that the very ontology of Vaiśeṣika can be shown to be an inversion of Sarvāstivāda ontology, and therefore deeply indebted to the latter.¹⁰ Equally important is the circumstance that all schools of Indian philosophy—including all the Brahmanical and Buddhist ones—had to come to terms, during the early centuries of the Common Era, with a set of problems that had hitherto played no role in any of them. These problems were linked to the conviction that words and things are closely related, and gave rise to a variety of different solutions: among them the *satkārya-vāda*, the *śūnya-vāda*, the *ajāti-vāda*, the *anekānta-vāda*, and much else.¹¹ It follows that Brahmanical and Buddhist thinkers were acquainted with each others' philosophies, and formed their own to at least some extent with those others in mind. This suggests that Buddhist and Brahmanical thinkers have confronted each other in debate from the beginning, even if these confrontations may have been less violent (and perhaps also less frequent) during the time preceding the middle of the first millennium. It could even be argued that Indian philosophy owes its very existence (and its beginning) to the availability of some form of public debate.

A new form of Brahmanical philosophy starts to participate in public debate roughly from the middle of the first millennium CE onward. This is the Vedānta philosophy, thus called because it claims to be based on the texts called *Upaniṣads*, which constitute the end (*anta*) of the *Veda*.¹² One of its branches, Advaita Vedānta, became in course of time exceptionally popular.

¹⁰ BRONKHORST (1992).

¹¹ BRONKHORST (2011).

¹² Though not strictly speaking a Vedāntin, we should include Bhartṛhari as an early representative of this new development.

Advaita Vedānta is remarkable in that it abandons the most important single feature that united the different Brahmanical philosophies until its time. Advaita Vedānta, unlike Vaiśeṣika and Sāṃkhya, and unlike other forms of Vedānta, accepts that the phenomenal world is an illusion. In other words, Advaita Vedānta claims for itself a position which had hitherto been the exclusive property of Buddhist philosophy.

The appearance of this totally different kind of Brahmanical philosophy is interesting from a philosophical point of view. It is also interesting from a general cultural point of view. If our reflections so far are correct, the 'realistic' bias of Brahmanical philosophy had to be understood in the light of the practical role which Brahmins played at and around the royal court. The tendency of Buddhist philosophers to deny the reality of the phenomenal world would then be linked to their incapacity to play a role, even an advisory role, in practical politics. The appearance and growing success of at least one Brahmanical philosophy that yet claimed that the phenomenal world is an illusion suggests that some important changes took place in South Asia roughly from the middle of the first millennium onward. These changes, one would think, concerned the relationship between religion and power. A detailed analysis of this issue must be left for another occasion.

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