

BUDDHISM AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

Author: Moojan Momen

Published by: George Ronald, Oxford, 1995, 114 pages

In 1990, Moojan Momen published a short book *Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith*, with the purpose of introducing the Bahá'í Faith to those with a knowledge of Hinduism.¹ *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith* is, in intent, scope, and style, a follow-up to *Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith*.

The author's goal with this latest book is not just to introduce the Bahá'í Faith to Buddhists but to show that both religions are compatible and, more, that the manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh fulfills prophecies of the Buddha about the coming of a future Buddha, Metteyya (Maitreya) Buddha.

The first chapter consists of a selection of Buddhist texts presenting the eight steps of the Buddha's "Noble Path" [to enlightenment], namely, Right View, Right Aim or Right-mindedness, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Living or Livelihood, Right Effort or Endeavour, Right Mindfulness, and Right Contemplation, followed by a variety of other topics such as death, forbearance, and generosity. Each of these topics is presented side-by-side with similar selections from Bahá'í writings. The author here demonstrates that the two religions have held quite similar views on each of these topics and thus that the Bahá'í Faith is entirely compatible with Buddhist beliefs. Chapter Two is a relatively in-depth analysis of Buddhist and Bahá'í metaphysics, what the author here entitles the "Structure of Existence." He examines some key concepts of Buddhism, such as transitoriness (*anitya*), the nature of the soul, the Absolute, rebirth, and nirvana, presenting the Bahá'í Faith as almost entirely in agreement with Buddhism about each topic. In each of these chapters, the author has done an excellent job of finding similar, sometimes almost identical, quotations from the Bahá'í writings available in English and the Buddhist scriptures. He has wisely chosen to confine himself to the Pali canon, the so-called Theravada (Old School) texts. This canon is one of hundreds of Buddhist collections of scripture, but it is widely acknowledged to be the oldest and, more important, is taken by almost all schools of Buddhism to be normative. The author's use of only the Pali texts thus bypasses the onerous question, What is original Buddhism? Chapter Three quotes Buddhist prophecies and seeks to portray the Bahá'í Faith as the fulfillment of those prophecies. Many of the quotations and calculations the author uses are taken from Jamshed Fozdar's *Buddha Maitreya Amitabha Has Appeared*,² to which book the author

1. Moojan Momen, *Hinduism and the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990) viii.

2. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976.

acknowledges his indebtedness. Momen presents only a gloss on this topic. While Fozdar spends over a hundred pages providing detailed and exact calculations attempting to show that many historical specifics of Bahá'u'lláh's life were explicitly foretold by the Buddha, Momen contents himself with demonstrating only that the future Buddha would appear sometime before A.D. 1943 and then providing general observations about the prophesied advent of Maitrya. The remaining three chapters of the book give a brief overview of the history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

Momen has produced a lucid, succinct, and well-written comparison of Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith. He has presented selections from the writings of the two religions that show the correspondences between them to be incontestable. He has done so without misrepresenting either religion. As an apologetic of the Bahá'í Faith directed to Theravada Buddhists, the book has admirably succeeded in this task. There are, however, some scholarly issues that this book raises that the author does not examine, namely, Buddhism as held by Buddhists does not accord well with Buddhism as the Bahá'í Faith presents it.

The author's agenda, as portrayed in his two books *Hinduism* and *Buddhism*, is one that could be termed inclusivist. The Bahá'í Faith, he writes, has the ability to reconcile disagreements within religions and between religions by showing that differing religious views of reality "are all valid aspects of the truth."³ The Bahá'í Faith promotes relativism, he holds, in such wise that all religious disagreements can be seen as stemming from nothing more than differing perspectives.⁴ This argument, while plausible and even convincing, threatens to do injustice to the religious beliefs of non-Bahá'ís. Nowhere is this more evident than with Buddhism.

The Bahá'í Faith holds that the Buddha was a Prophet from God who taught the reality of the "Oneness of God"⁵ and clearly foretold the coming of another Prophet. Both Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism are virtually unanimous in believing that the Buddha felt himself to be an ordinary human, that the enlightenment he achieved was theoretically within the reach of any human, that he eschewed talk of God, that he emphatically and consistently denied the reality of the soul, and that for him to have prophesied a future world-redeemer such as Maitrya Buddha would have been entirely out of character with his teachings. This view of Buddhism has been held, not just by non-Bahá'í Buddhologists, but also by some Bahá'í scholars (e.g., Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*, where she writes that the

3. Momen, *Hinduism* 5.

4. Moojan Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics," *Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, vol. 5 (Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1988).

5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney, 4th ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 165.

Buddha's prophethood is not a tenet of the Theravada).⁶ If the Bahá'í interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha is to be upheld, Buddhism will have to be radically reevaluated. Most Buddhists and Buddhologists would find such an attempt at reinterpretation to be futile and, possibly, offensive. Momen's book takes a convincing step towards opening the possibility of such a reevaluation.

The author acknowledges the apparently polar differences between the philosophies of the two religions but argues that the differences are caused mostly by the differing societal paradigms within which the Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh were operating. The Buddha, on the one hand, may have negated concepts such as God and Soul in order to contest the authority and orthodoxy of the Brahmin priesthood, not to refute such concepts completely. Bahá'u'lláh, on the other hand, employed concepts like God and Soul because such concepts were what those in his culture would understand (20). When one looks at the issue from the Bahá'í standpoint, i.e., weighing the philosophy of the Buddha in the balance of Bahá'u'lláh's cosmology, such a reconciliation of the two is convincing and is clearly supported by a variety of statements in the Pali corpus. However, when one looks from the standpoint of modern scholastic consensus, such a reconciliation is plausible but is no more persuasive than many other interpretations. Three examples will help explain this.

The *locus classicus* of the theistic interpretation of Buddhism is the following passage from the Pali corpus: "There is, O monks, an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed. Were there not, O monks, this Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, there would be no escape from the world of the born, originated, created, formed" (quoted in Momen, *Buddhism* 23). From the Bahá'í standpoint, this passage clearly indicates that the Buddha believed in an Ultimate Reality. However, the common Buddhist interpretation is that, to be consistent with the whole of the Buddha's scheme of metaphysical logic, his point in this passage was no more than that all concepts come in dialectical pairs; if one is to refer to the transitory world, one must posit a transcendent base for it, but that, to the wise person, neither is in any way real. Thus, the Buddhist interpretation is that to see the Buddha as here affirming an Ultimate Reality would be exactly the same as declaring him to be a nihilist, and both positions are wrong.

A second issue is the nature of Prophethood and Buddhahood. The Bahá'í teachings declare the Buddha to be a Manifestation of God who was consciously inspired by the divine reality. The Buddhist belief is that the Buddha was a mere human who, through right aim and right effort, "awoke" (*budh* = to awake). One need follow no specific set of teachings and no religion to achieve the ultimate goal of awakening. To exemplify this, the Pali scriptures

6. Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1993) 178.

contain numerous parables of people who, never having met the Buddha, nor having heard his teachings, nor even having heard of him at all, attained enlightenment merely by being told "all is suffering, all is impermanent" (*sarvam duhkham, sarvam anityam*). These are the two key insights of the Buddha, and, to achieve the highest goal, one need know nothing more than these two facts. To support the opposing Bahá'í cosmology, the author finds statements of the Buddha in which the Buddha says that he is unlike any other human, that Buddhas arise in the world but rarely, and that the nirvana realized by the normal human is not the same nirvana enjoyed by the Buddha. Since both equally convincing sets of statements are from the same source, the author argues that, though the Buddhist interpretation differs from the Bahá'í one, such a difference may ultimately be nothing more than a matter of perspective.

A final example is perhaps the clearest. A commonly used honorific of the Buddha is *Tathágatha*. The intended meaning of this word was lost in the earliest days of Buddhist history, for it is a compound of two possible words. To support the view that the Buddha was an ordinary person who achieved greatness and thus to show the potential ability of all people to escape suffering, the word is almost universally translated as *Tathá* = "thus" + *gata* = "gone," i.e., "one who has left the world and entered the state of neither being nor non-being." The other meaning of the term, one which supports the Bahá'í view, is that the *Tathágata* is *Tathá*, "thus," + *ágata* = "come," i.e., "one who has entered the world from beyond." Each interpretation of the word is equally plausible.⁷

These three examples show that the Bahá'í interpretation of Buddhism is in many ways completely at odds with the normative interpretations of Buddhism, but that, at the same time, it could very well prevail. However, it is unlikely that such a reinterpretation would be readily accepted by Buddhists or the academic community. The current and firmly held attitude within the field of Comparative Religion is to treat all religions as phenomenologically *sui generis* and to be reluctant to make comparisons. Any attempt at explaining one tradition through recourse to the philosophy of another is regarded with historically justifiable suspicion. The value of *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith* is not that it will convince any Buddhologist of the Bahá'í view but that it will help to increase awareness that it is possible to interpret Buddhism in ways radically divergent from the ways Buddhists have tended to do so. It must be admitted that this review of the book may be reading more into it than was intended, for the book purports to be nothing more than a simple introduction to the Bahá'í Faith for those with a background in Buddhism. Nonetheless, this apparent tension between the two interpretations must be discussed, for a Buddhist likely would not find the Bahá'í Faith to be as compatible with his or her religion as the author portrays it to be.

7. Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975) 36.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has said that "the original principles of His [the Buddha's] doctrines gradually disappeared, and ignorant customs and ceremonials arose. . . ."⁸ Such a statement is difficult to accept in light of the standard portrayals of Buddhism, for few Buddhists would be willing to accept what the Bahá'í Faith declares to be original Buddhism. This book is one portent of a possible wholesale reinterpretation of the religion, one that is founded on the same scriptures on which the heretofore standard interpretations of Buddhism have been founded and one that could eventually become scholastically acceptable.

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8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 165.