

Islam and Buddhism Relations from Balkh to Bangkok and Tokyo

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*On truth's path, wise is mad, insane is wise.
In love's way, self and other are the same.
Having drunk the wine, my love, of being one with you,
I find the way to Mecca and Bodhgaya are the same.*

(Rūmī, *Kullīyyāt-e Shams-e Tabrīzī*, no. 302)

Introduction

This is the first time in its ninety-nine year history of publication that *The Muslim World* journal is dedicating a special issue to the theme of Islam-Buddhism. This initiative highlights the expansion of the journal's coverage and is a new point of departure in the venture of Islamic Studies, which up until recently, has largely been restricted to relations between adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths. Hopefully, in the near future, this journal will also consider Islam's relations with the other Asian and African religions.

The history of interreligious relations and exchange between Islam and Buddhism extends over their meetings in West, Central, South, Southeast and Far East Asia. This historic exchange dates from the ages of the Silk Road (4 BCE–1400 CE) and the Age of Commerce (1450–1680 CE). The early meetings were followed, in some cases, by conversion to Islam, as in the cases of Central and maritime Southeast Asia. Yet, there remained regions where Buddhism and Islam continued to exist side-by-side, as in the cases of India and mainland Southeast Asia.

Buddhism and Islam — History of Relations

Since Buddha and Buddhism pay scant attention to the concept of *theos* — God, it is often remarked that Buddhism is not really a religion but rather a philosophy. However, worldwide evidence of the practice of Buddhism illustrates that it is a religion with a philosophical bent. T. William Hall defines religion as follows, "Religion is the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which

people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them.” With this definition in mind, we can see that Buddhism fits into the category of religion rather than philosophy.

There is a long history of relations between Islam and Buddhism. Indeed, the religious encounter between Islam and Buddhism is as old as Islam itself. It was and is an encounter between two totally different religions in terms of their doctrines and worldviews. Yet, there are deep and subtle compatibilities between them when viewed from the perspectives of history and the phenomenology of religion.

The first encounter between Islam and *aṣḥāb al-Bidada*, or the Buddhist community, took place in the middle of the 7th century in the regions of East Persia, Transoxiana, Afghanistan and Sindh. Historical evidence suggests that early Muslims extended the Qur’ānic category of *ahl al-Kitāb* (people of the book, or revealed religion) to include the Hindus and the Buddhists.

During the second century of Islam or the eighth century CE, Central Asian Muslims translated many Buddhist works into Arabic. We come across Arabic titles such as *Bilawbar wa Būdhāsaf* and *Kitāb al-Budd* as evidence of Muslims learning about Buddhism.

In spite of being aware of the idol-worship of the Buddha, Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995 CE), the author of *al-Fibrīst*, comments that:

These people (Buddhists of Khurasan) are the most generous of all the inhabitants of the earth and of all the religionists. This is because their prophet *Budhasaf* (*Bodhisattva*) has taught them that the greatest sin, which should never be thought of or committed, is the utterance of ‘No.’ Hence they act upon this advice; they regard the uttering of ‘No’ as an act of Satan. And it is their very religion to banish Satan.

There is evidence of Buddhist survival in the succeeding Muslim era of this region (Central Asia), such as the Barmak family of Buddhist monks, who played a powerful administrative role in the early ‘Abbāsīd dynasty. The ‘Abbāsīds ruled from Baghdad during 750–1258 CE, governing most of the Islamic world. The Barmakids controlled the Buddhist monastery of *Naw Bahār* near Balkh in addition to other Iranian monasteries.

There was also the continuation of several Buddhist beliefs and practices among the Muslim converts of Central Asia. For example, the Sāmānīd dynasty, which ruled Persia during the ninth and tenth centuries, invented and modeled the *madrasa* or Muslim religious schools that were devoted to advanced studies in the Islamic religious sciences along the pattern of the Buddhist schools in eastern Iran. Similar may be the case of the *pondoks* or *pasenterens* — the Muslim religious seminaries in Southeast Asia.

The Muslim religious scholar and historian Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839–923 CE), who was born in Āmul in Ṭabaristān, northern Persia, mentions that Buddhist idols were brought from Kābul, Afghanistan, to Baghdād in the ninth century. It is also reported that Buddhist idols were sold in a Buddhist temple next to the Makh mosque in the market of the city of Bukhārā in present Uzbekistan.

Rashīd al-Dīn Ṭabīb, also known as Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh al-Hamadhānī (1247–1318 CE), the grand vizier at the Īlkhānid court in Persia and the author of *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh* — *Compendium of Chronicles* or *World History*, also discussed Buddhism and its features in his compendium, though al-Bīrūnī did not discuss Buddhism in his *Kitāb al-Hind*.

The second encounter between Islam and Buddhism took place in South and Southeast Asia beginning around the 12th–16th centuries A.D. In the case of India, there is a common misunderstanding that Islam wiped out Buddhism through conversion and persecution. Regarding this, Islamicist Marshall Hodgson remarks:

Probably Buddhism did not yield to Islam so much by direct conversion as by a more insidious route: the sources of recruitment to the relatively unaristocratic Buddhism — for instance, villagers coming to the cities and adopting a new allegiance to accord to their new status — turned now rather to Islam than to an outdated Buddhism. The record of the massacre of one monastery in Bengal, combined with the inherited Christian conception of Muslims as the devotees of the sword has yielded the widely repeated statement that the Muslims violently ‘destroyed’ Buddhism in India. Muslims were not friendly to it, but there is no evidence that they simply killed off all the Buddhists, or even all the monks. It will take much active revision before such assessments of the role of Islam, based largely on unexamined preconceptions, are eliminated even from educated mentalities.

The third meeting between Islam and the Hindu-Buddhist civilization took place in *Nusantara*, the Indo-Malay archipelago, including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. It was a sort of meeting between the monotheistic, monistic and non-theistic religious traditions. Islam arrived here in its mystic orientation, which was shaped by the Persian and Indian traditions of Sufism.

The Muslim individuals who brought Islam first to Indonesia and then Malaysia and southern Thailand in the 12th–15th centuries were Sufi mystics. In religious terms, it was an encounter between the Hindu view of *moksha* — liberation — through the notion of monism, the Buddhist notion of *nirvana* — enlightenment — through the realization of *sunyata* — emptiness — and the Islamic concept of *fanā'* — the passing away of one's identity through its merge in Universal being — as presented in the monotheistic pantheism of the Sufis. Gradually there emerged a hybrid culture, particularly in Java and in other parts of Southeast Asia, resulting in an Islam that was mystical, fluid and soft, and a spiritualism that is peculiar to the region.

Buddhism as a Non-Theistic Religion

Humanity has experienced the Ultimate Reality in three ways, i.e., from outside, as in the cases of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and other Semitic prophets; from within, as in the case of the Indian religions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism; and through a medium, as in the case of the Shamanistic and African religions. In this sense,

the Buddha encountered the Ultimate Reality from within, and resulted in *nirvana* — enlightenment — which equals *sunyata* — nothingness. The Buddhist concept of *sunyata* is closer to the Abrahamic religious notion of transcendental monotheism.

Usually monotheists, i.e., Middle Eastern Jews, Christians and Muslims along with their religious counterparts from Europe, are quick to comment that the Asian religions of Hinduism, Jainism, Taoism and Shinto are polytheistic religions. The reasons for this lies in Middle Eastern monotheism, which condemns any superficial sign of the worship of many deities as constituting polytheism. The root cause of this lies in being unable to distinguish between personal and non-personal views of the Ultimate Reality. Monotheistic religions view God in personal terms, while non-theistic religions view the Ultimate Reality in two ways: 1) the worship of many *devas* — gods — at a popular level; and 2) a non-personal Ultimate Reality at the philosophical level. Max Müller defined it as henotheism, i.e., worshipping a single non-personal universal principle called *Brahman*, which is monistic in nature in relation to the human soul — the *Atman* — and also accepting of the existence of other deities. “Non-theistic concepts of deity are seen as alternatives to theistic notions regarded as unacceptable on religious, as well as affective and rational grounds.” In Greek, Indian and Chinese religious traditions, theistic and non-theistic notions of deity are not seen as contradictory but are viewed as complementary.

In the Western philosophy of religion, non-theistic concepts of deity are found in the religious thought of Whitehead’s process theology, Paul Tillich’s concept of God as “ultimate concern,” Charles Hartshorne’s “dipolar theism” and the Christian existentialist theology of John Macquarrie.

In Buddhism, the principle of non-personal Ultimate Reality or Absolute is described as *nirvana* — enlightenment. The Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna (150–250 CE) attributed it as *sunyata* — emptiness. Entrance into *nirvana* is determined by the law of *karma*, whose result is based on the moral activity of the human being tied to *samsara* — the cycle of rebirth — from which an individual seeks liberation. This teaching constitutes the *dharmā* — the teaching, or the righteous path — comparable to the *sharī‘a* — the way — of Islam and Jewish *Halakha* — the law, the path. Both Hinduism and Buddhism have a non-dualistic view of Ultimate Reality.

The Indian religious scene is comprised of a belief in a multiplicity of *devas* — gods — along with the Hindu concept of monism — nature being constituted of one substance. Buddhism also recognizes the existence of a great number of impermanent *devas* — gods — and of men who become *buddhas* — that is, achieve enlightenment, along with the belief that the world operates according to the law of *dharmā* — the moral order — and that the Ultimate Reality is comprised of *sunyata* — emptiness. Buddhism views the question of God as irrelevant.

While I risk being accused of generalizing, I see some philosophical compatibility between theistic and non-theistic views of Ultimate Reality as defined in the concepts of Elohim/Yahweh, Christ and Allāh, and the Buddhist view that the Ultimate Reality consists of *sunyata* — emptiness.

Buddha and Muḥammad — The Prophetic Dimension

From a Muslim perspective of the history of religions, God has since time immemorial sent prophets to every nation, only some of which are mentioned by name in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān mentions twenty-five prophets, including Muḥammad, all of them belonging to the Semitic world. It was impossible for the Qur'ān to mention all the world prophets, for if it had done so, it would not have been able to convey its message to the Arabs, who were its main addressees and who at that time did not know much about other religions, especially those in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is a book of revelation and not a dictionary of religions.

The Qur'ān comments on the universality of the institution of prophethood in the following way:

And indeed, [O Muḥammad], We have sent forth apostles before your time; some of them We have mentioned to thee, and some of them We have not mentioned to thee. (Qur'ān 40:78. See also Qur'ān 4:164)

And never have We sent forth any apostle otherwise than [with a message] in own people's tongue . . . (Qur'ān 14:4)

Hence, Islam's position toward other religions is that of an openness to religious pluralism. Islam recognizes the existence of different religions, including Buddhism.

Furthermore, the Qur'ān states that:

To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If God had so willed He would have made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute. (Qur'ān 5:48)

The religious experiences of *nirvana* — enlightenment — by the Buddha, and of *wahy* — revelation — by Muḥammad are sources of an essential message of moderation in religion.

The perfection of the Buddha and Muḥammad is connected to their achievements as enlightened prophets who overcame the impediments of religious ignorance. In the case of the Buddha, this ignorance is rooted in the cycle of *samsara* — rebirth due to attachment as the cause of *dukkha* — suffering. In the case of Muḥammad, it lies in illusions of *kufur* — human rebelliousness, or human rejection/denial of the existence of God — and *shirk* — polytheism, or the attribution of divine qualities to aught but God as the cause of *khusr* — loss. Interestingly, both the Buddha and Muḥammad from the Islamic point of view were neither *mushriks* — polytheists — nor *kāfirs* — those who associate other beings with God — as they both rejected the petty gods of their respective communities.

A classical Muslim scholar of comparative religion, al-Shahrastānī (1086–1153 CE), in the section on *ārā' al-Hind* — *The Views of the Indians* in his *magnum opus*, *Kitāb al-Milal wa l-Niḥal* — *The Book of Religious and Philosophical Sects*, evidences high

regard for Buddhism and its rich spirituality. This was done by identifying the Buddha with the Qur'ānic figure of *al-Khidr* as a seeker of enlightenment.

More recently, the late Prof. Muhammad Hamidullah observed that in line with the Qur'ānic view of prophethood, the Buddha can be regarded as one among the previous prophets. According to Hamidullah, the symbolic mention of the fig tree in Chapter 95, Verse 1 of the Qur'ān, alludes to the prophethood of the Buddha. He concludes that since Buddha attained *nirvana* — enlightenment — under a wild fig (*ficus religiosa*) tree and because that fig tree does not figure prominently in the life of any of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān, the Qur'ānic verse refers to Gautama Buddha.

By the fig and the olive,
 By Mount Sinai,
 And by this land made safe;
 Surely We created man of the best stature
 Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low,
 Save those who believe and do good works, and theirs is a reward unailing.
 So who henceforth will give the lie to thee about the judgment?
 Is not Allah the most conclusive of all judges? (Qur'ān 95:1–8)

What further facilitates this Islamic interpretation is the status of the Buddha. There is a parallel between the Qur'ānic concept of *risāla* — messengership, i.e., the history of the prophets (named and unnamed) — and the Buddhist concept of “Buddha.” Buddha is not a name, it is a designation like *nabī* or *rasūl* — prophet, or messenger. Buddhas appear over time to teach religion and the path to *nirvana* — enlightenment, salvation. Buddhist sources mention that twenty-seven Buddhas have appeared over a period of 5,000 years.

Buddha's enlightenment experience of *nirvana* and Muḥammad's experience of *wahy* — revelation were liberative experiences freeing both founders of religions from the shackles of ignorance and social bondage. Both these prophets sought answers to questions about the human predicament: What is it to be human? Why is there anguish, suffering and injustice? The Buddha called it *dukkha* — suffering; the Qur'ān calls it *kabad* — affliction. The parallel between the teachings of the Buddha and Muḥammad can be seen in the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and the Qur'ānic *sūrat al-Balad* — *The City* (90), mentioned below.

1. Life means *dukkha* — suffering.
2. The origin of suffering is attachment.
3. The cessation of suffering is attainable.
4. The (eight fold) path to the cessation of suffering. (The Four Noble Truths)

NAY! I call to witness this land —
 this land in which thou art free to dwell —
 and [I call to witness] parent and offspring:
 Verily, We have created man into [a life of] *kabad* — pain, toil and trial.
 Does he, then, think that no one has power over him?

He boasts, 'I have spent wealth abundant!
 Does he, then, think that no one sees him?
 Have We not given him two eyes,
 and a tongue, and a pair of lips,
 and shown him the two highways [of good and evil]?
 But he would not try to ascend the steep uphill road . . .
 And what could make thee conceive what it is, that steep uphill road?
 [It is] the freeing of one's neck [from the burden of sin/bondage],
 or the feeding, upon a day of [one's own] hunger,
 of an orphan near of kin,
 or of a needy [stranger] lying in the dust —
 and being, withal, of those who have attained to faith, and who enjoin upon one
 another patience in adversity, and enjoin upon one another compassion.
 Such are they that have attained to righteousness;
 whereas those who are bent on denying the truth of Our messages — they are such
 as have lost themselves in evil,
 [with] fire closing in upon them. (Qur'ān 90:1–20)

I see an analogical compatibility between the Qur'ānic usage of the word *kabad*, meaning “pain,” “distress,” “hardship,” “toil” and “trial,” and the Buddhist concept of *dukkha* — suffering — and I find it useful in explaining the Islamic concepts of life, its struggles and its goals.

Through *nirvana* — enlightenment, the Buddha was liberated from the fetters of suffering (*dukkha*) and entered the state of relief, peace, calmness and rest. He was freed from the state of confusion, turmoil, anguish and distress and entered the state of bliss — detachment. Similarly, Muḥammad's experience of the *wahy* — revelation, liberated him from the suffering caused by religious ignorance in his milieu, as represented by *shirk* — polytheism, the attribution of divine qualities to aught but God — and *kufir* — the rejection/denial of the existence of One Unseen God — into submission to God. Thus, the Buddha through *nirvana* entered the state of bliss, marking his freedom from suffering and rebirth, and Muḥammad through the experience of *wahy* entered the state of *salām* — peace. Both became founders of world religions which carry the message of human freedom and liberation. The Buddha realized the state of being *arabant* — an enlightened human being, and Muḥammad the state of being *rasūl* — the Messenger of God. Both are prophets from the perspective of the Islamic history of religions and each of them defeated the antagonistic forces or evil, called *mara* in Buddhism and *shayṭān* in Islam. This is described in the Buddhist narrative of the Buddha's struggle with the forces of *mara* during the process of his enlightenment, as contained in the Buddhist text of *Sutta Nipata* (425–449). Similarly, a *ḥadīth* — tradition — mentions that the Prophet Muḥammad remarked: “*Aslama shayṭānī*” (“My *shayṭān* has become a Muslim,” i.e., a believer). This means that the Prophet struggled, trained and turned his whole self into the obedience and the service of God. The Prophet had become *al-insān al-kāmil* — the Perfect Man — to whom the *shayṭān* prostrated or bowed his will.

Through *nirvana*, the Buddha realized his *Buddha-dhatu* — Buddha nature, the state of mindfulness and enlightenment, the original nature present in all beings. As for the Prophet Muḥammad, he actualized the *dīn al-ḥiṭra* — *religio naturalis* — and the human perfection of *al-insān al-kāmil*. And this points to the Qur'ānic concept of the Prophet as being the *khātim al-anbiyā'* — the Seal of the Prophets. Both these prophets realized their enlightened human status in the religious and social contexts of their respective societies.

The Buddha obtained *nirvana* from within himself on the basis of self-effort while seeking an answer to the question of *dukkha* — human suffering and salvation — whereas Muḥammad obtained the *wahy* — revelation — from outside himself while seeking to discern the meaning of being an *insān* — human — in terms of creation, the meaning of life and its end goal.

The Contemporary State of Relations Between Islam and Buddhism

Today, Islam and Buddhism coexist in Buddhist majority countries such as Mongolia, Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Taiwan, as well as with Buddhist minorities in Japan, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, India, Nepal, and also in Europe and North America.

The most devastating incident in Islam-Buddhism relations in present times was the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues in March 2001. This left a lasting negative impression on the Buddhist view of Islam and Muslims, though this has not been publicly stated by the majority of Buddhists. In terms of interreligious dialogue, the interchange between the worldviews of Islam and Buddhism involves crosscultural exchanges between what is referred to as *dīn* in Arabic and *sāsana* in Sanskrit and Pali, as well as between their local meanings as used by Muslims and Buddhists, such as the Thai reference to *sāsana*, the Chinese understanding of *fójiào*, the Japanese meaning of *buk kyō* or the Korean perception of *bulgyo* — all of which mean Buddhism — and, on the other hand, the Indo-Malay Muslim concept of *agama* and the Indian Subcontinent Muslim reference to *madhhab*, both of which refer to Islam. Thus, the interchange between Islam and Buddhism is not a simple two-way interaction but involves the meanings of the two religions in their local and regional contexts.

Today, Muslim-Buddhist dialogue is largely a marginal activity, as the two religions coexist rather than actually dialogue. There are few scholars committed to the study of Islam and Buddhism, and those who do tend to focus on historical relations rather than on the doctrinal and socio-political aspects of the relationship between the two religions in our time.

Islam-Buddhism relations also has some negative aspects. Though the relations between the two religious communities are generally tolerant and peaceful, there are also areas in which they are in conflict. One thinks of the ongoing ethno-religious conflict in southern Thailand, the expulsion of Arakanese Muslim from Myanmar and the

political implications of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka on the Tamil Muslims in that country. In these cases, Islam and Buddhism function as sources of religious nationalism.

A recent academic effort on the study, research and discourse between Islam and Buddhism was the May 29–30, 2009 conference entitled “Buddhism and Islam: Encounters, Histories, Dialogue and Representation” jointly organized by the Faculty of Religious Studies, the Institute of Islamic Studies and the Centre for Research on Religion of McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

At the level of religious community initiatives, The Foundation of the Islamic Center in Thailand, Bangkok, holds occasional dialogue sessions with Thai Buddhist monks, scholars and laypersons about issues of common national and international concerns. Similar initiatives are undertaken by both Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia.

At the international level, after the destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan and the 9/11 tragedy, the Taiwanese Dharma Master Hsin Tao, Chief Executive Officer of the Museum of World Religions, Taipei, initiated a series of dialogues between Buddhists and Muslims which took place in different parts of the world.

The first dialogue took place at Columbia University, New York, on March 7, 2002 and was followed by dialogues in Kuala-Lumpur on May 11, 2002 and Jakarta on July 30, 2002. On May 5–7, 2003, the Dharma Master also organized a Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue Conference on Global Ethics and Good Governance at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France; on November 7–8, 2005, a Muslim-Buddhist Dialogue Symposium in Morocco; in 2006, a Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue Conference in China. The latest meeting in this dialogue series was held on September 3–4, 2008 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. These dialogues were attended by Muslim and Buddhist scholars, activists and community leaders and included discussions on topics such as global ethics and good governance, religious responses to violence, interfaith peace education and community partnership building, poverty and social inequality, ecological healing and earth rights. The dialogue meetings focused on fostering mutual awareness between the Muslim and Buddhist communities and on finding effective ways of educating them about the commonalities they share in spite of their differences.

This special issue of *The Muslim World* is a further effort towards understanding Islam-Buddhism relations from the viewpoints of history, theology/doctrine and societies. It offers articles that consider Islam and Buddhism from these various angles.

In his historical survey of the Buddhist and Muslim worlds and the state of their mutual knowledge, Alexander Berzin highlights the need for more Muslim Buddhist interfaith understanding through dialogues and conferences, which will contribute towards religious harmony and world peace.

Richard Foltz looks at the rise and spread of Buddhism in eastern Iran and opines that it still plays a subtle, albeit often obscured, role in the contemporary Iranian milieu.

Kieko Obuse addresses the question of the status of the Buddha as a prophet from the perspective of Islamic theology.

Maria Reis Habito contends that the Buddhist doctrine of the Buddha-Nature can serve as a topic in a Buddhist-Muslim dialogical process.

Todd LeRoy Perreira examines the practice of death meditation in Islam in the specific context of Sufism as explained by al-Ghazālī and among modern Thai monks, whose practice of mindfulness of death and meditation on the foulness of the body is associated with the Theravada Buddhist tradition systematized by the Indian commentator and scholar Buddhaghosa.

Toby Mayer's article draws attention to the homologies between Yoga and Sufism at the levels of values, structure and function.

Johan Elverskog's article discusses the state of technological exchanges between the Buddhist and Muslim print world.

Somparn Promta, a Thai Buddhist philosopher, calls for a new Buddhist understanding and attitude towards other religions.

Mohamed Yusoff Ismail offers an anthropological study of the coexistence of Buddhism and Islam in the state of Kelantan, Malaysia, where the Siamese Buddhist community freely engages in its Theravada religious life and ritual practices.

Jean Berlie's comparative study of Buddhism and Islam in Yunnan, China, describes the character and the state of cross-cultural exchanges and influences between the two religious communities.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's article offers Christian insights towards a Buddhist-Muslim dialogue. He brings to light crucial issues in the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue venture.

Hopefully, this special issue of *The Muslim World* will go a long way in contributing to the further study and dialogue of Islam and Buddhism.

Historical Survey of the Buddhist and Muslim Worlds' Knowledge of Each Other's Customs and Teachings

Alexander Berzin¹

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The Pre-Islamic Period

Sākya-muni Buddha lived in north central India from 566 to 485 BCE. He taught a spiritual path of meditation and training that fit within the context of the pan-Indic thought of his time. Thus, Buddha accepted the basic assertions found in most Indian philosophical schools. These included repeated rebirth (Skt. *saṃsāra*) in a wide variety of life forms, not only human, characterized by suffering, caused by unawareness or confusion, and under the influence of behavioral cause and effect (Skt. *karma*). The spiritual goal is to achieve liberation from such rebirth through gaining correct, full understanding of the nature of the self or "soul" (Skt. *ātman*) and of all other phenomena. The methods for achieving this goal are primarily through ethical self-discipline, purification, perfect concentration, study, and meditation.

Buddha was aware of the other Indian philosophical and religious systems of his time.² He disagreed, however, with the methods they taught for purification and their assertions concerning the nature of the self and of all other phenomena. Consequently, the presentations he gave concerning these issues were often in the form of a refutation of these other views. Subsequent Indian Buddhist masters kept abreast of the philosophical developments in these other Indian schools and often engaged in rigorous debate with their proponents.³

In the centuries following Buddha's life, the Buddhist teachings spread from the Indian subcontinent to present-day Afghanistan, eastern Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.⁴ Both lay and monastic Buddhist communities came to flourish there. In these areas, Buddhism encountered the beliefs and customs of Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Neo-Platonism, and, eventually, Manichaeism. The Buddhist masters took interest in and learned about the native religions in these areas to which it was spreading. This is evidenced by the fact that sometimes Buddhism adopted certain local customs, such as vegetarianism in Neo-Platonic cultural regions.⁵ In other cases, Buddhism emphasized points in Indian Buddhism that resonated with facets of the native beliefs. For example, the bodhisattva ideal, pure lands, and Amitābha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, have parallels in Zoroastrianism, as found in the Iranian cultural areas.⁶

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The Buddhist texts, however, did not hesitate to point out ethically objectionable customs of these areas as well. *The Great Commentary*,⁷ for instance, compiled in Kashmīr in the second century CE, described incest and the killing of ants as being sanctioned by the Yonaka teachings. The Yonakas refer, literally, to the Greek settlers of the Bactrian region of the Kūṣān Empire, but more particularly to the Indo-Scythians living there, who were followers of Zoroastrianism and Mithraism.⁸

The Umayyad Caliphate (661–750 CE)

Muḥammad lived in Arabia from 570 to 632 CE, nearly a thousand years after Buddha. Thus, for most of its formative years in India, Buddhist literature contains no references to Islam or to its teachings. However, even after the time of the Prophet, Buddhist sources make only scant reference to the tenets of the Islamic faith that was spreading into the areas where Buddhism was already well-established. This was in marked contrast to the knowledge of native religions that Buddhist masters sought when Buddhism itself was being introduced into new regions. Muslim scholars, on the other hand, showed more interest in the Buddhist customs they encountered as Islam spread from the Arabian Peninsula.⁹

Starting in the mid-seventh century CE, three decades after the time of the Prophet, the areas of Iran, Afghanistan, and West Turkistan to which Buddhism had spread came under the rule of the Arab Umayyad Caliphate. Here, the first contact occurred between the Muslim and Buddhist civilizations.¹⁰

Indian communities were already present in Arabia and in many of the nearby ports, such as Baṣrah in modern-day southern Iraq, centuries before the advent of Islam. They consisted mostly of Jāṭs from Sindh. According to the *History of the Prophets and Kings*¹¹ by Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (830–923), among them were “red-clad ones,”¹² namely Buddhist monks.¹³ The Umayyad Islamic scholar Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’ (700–748), the founder of the Mu‘tazilah School, supposedly was well-acquainted with Buddhist ideas.¹⁴ As in Buddhism, Mu‘tazilah emphasizes seeking higher knowledge through rational disputation and logic. Moreover, it also asserts purification of one’s sins through repeated rebirth.¹⁵ How much knowledge Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’ actually had of Buddhism, however, and how much influence he received, on the other hand, from ancient Greek rational thought that was also present in Baṣrah at that time, is difficult to ascertain.

A clearer example of Muslim knowledge of Buddhism during the Umayyad period is ‘Umar ibn al-Azraq al-Kirmāni. This Arab author took interest in explaining Buddhism to his Islamic audience. Consequently, at the beginning of the eighth century CE, he wrote a detailed account of the Nava Vihāra Monastery in Balkh, Afghanistan. Nava Vihāra served as the principal center of higher Buddhist learning for all of Central Asia and was the greatest monastery of the entire region. Al-Kirmāni explained the basic Buddhist customs there in terms of analogous features in Islam. Thus, he described the main temple as having a stone cube in the center, draped with cloth, and devotees as

circumambulating it and making prostration, as is the case with the Kaaba¹⁶ in Mecca. He did not, however, discuss any of the Buddhist beliefs.¹⁷

Al-Kirmānī's writings were preserved in the tenth-century CE work, *Book of Lands*,¹⁸ by Ibn al-Faḡīh al-Hamadhānī. Buddhist scholars, however, do not seem to have shown reciprocal interest in explaining the Muslim customs or beliefs to the Buddhist audience. There is no recorded evidence of any such description at this time.

The 'Abbāsīd Caliphate (750–1258 CE)

The earliest more protracted contact between Buddhist and Muslim scholars began in the mid-eighth century CE during the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate. Its second caliph, al-Manṣūr (ruled 754–775 CE), employed Indian architects to construct a new capital for his empire. He named it "Baghdād," a Sanskrit name meaning "Gift from God."¹⁹ As part of the city plan, the Caliph had a House of Knowledge²⁰ built for the study and translation of literature from the Greek and Indian cultural worlds, particularly concerning scientific topics. The next 'Abbāsīd ruler, Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–785 CE), invited many Buddhist monk scholars from the monasteries on the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan to work at this House of Knowledge. He commissioned them to help translate primarily medical and astronomical texts from Sanskrit into Arabic.

The chief minister of the fifth 'Abbāsīd caliph, Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809 CE), was Yaḥyā ibn Barmak, a Muslim grandson of one of the Buddhist administrative heads of Nava Vihāra Monastery in Balkh. Although Buddhist scholars were already present at the House of Knowledge in Baghdād at that time, Yaḥyā invited yet more Buddhist scholars, especially from Kashmīr. The focus was on translating, from Sanskrit into Arabic, Buddhist medical texts, specifically Ravigupta's *Ocean of Attainments*.²¹

It does seem, however, that discussions of religious beliefs did occur at that time between the Buddhist and Islamic scholars. Evidence for this comes from *The Book of Religions and Creeds*,²² a treatise on Islamic heresies, in which the twelfth-century CE theologian, al-Shahrastānī, gives a brief account of the image the Islamic scholars had of Buddhism during Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd's time. As the main interest at the House of Knowledge lay in Greek thought, however, their study of Buddhism was not in depth.²³ Nevertheless, Ibn al-Nadīm's late tenth-century CE *Book of Catalogues*,²⁴ listed several Buddhist works that were rendered into Arabic at that time, such as an account of Buddha's previous lives, *The Book of the Buddha*.²⁵ The text was based on two Sanskrit works: *A Rosary of Previous Life Accounts*²⁶ and Aśvaghoṣa's *Deeds of the Buddha*.²⁷

Such translations led not only to knowledge of certain features of Buddhism among Arabic readers, but also to borrowings from Buddhist literature into Islamic culture. Occasionally, these borrowings came through the bridge of Manichaean sources. A possible example is the account of previous lives of the Buddha as a bodhisattva, known in medieval Christian sources as *Barlaam and Josaphat*.²⁸ It is well-known that Manichaean Sogdian versions of these accounts²⁹ were written prior to their first appearance in an Arabic version as *The Book of Bilawbar and Yudasaf*,³⁰ compiled by

Aban al-Lahiqi (750–815 CE) in Baghdād. This Islamic rendition incorporated parts of *The Book of the Buddha*. Since al-Lahiki's text is no longer extant, it is unclear how much material he also incorporated in it from Manichaeic sources. If some were, it would most likely have been through the influence of dialogue between Buddhist and Manichaeic Muslim scholars present, at that time, in the 'Abbāsīd court.³¹

Some scholars have speculated a possible influence from Buddhism on early Sufism.³² This is debatable. Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī (804–874 CE), for example, introduced into Sufism the concepts of *fanā'* (cessation of existence — the total destruction of the individual ego in becoming one with God) and *kbud'a* (deceit or trick, as the description of the material world) from the influence of his teacher, Abū 'Alī al-Sindi. Zaehner has argued convincingly,³³ however, that al-Sindi, known to have been a convert from another religion, most probably derived the former concept from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* and the latter from the *Svetāśvetara Upaniṣad*, as interpreted by the Advaitya Vedānta founder, Śaṅkara (788–820 CE). Although all forms of Buddhism deal with the similar topic of *nirvāṇa* (release from recurring rebirth) and many Mahāyāna schools assert that the world of appearances is similar, although not equivalent, to *māyā* (illusion), it is hardly likely that any of their formulations played a role in the development of Sufi thought.

The Kālacakra Literature

Although the Muslim scholars in Baghdād took interest in the Buddhist thought and literature, the Buddhist scholars there seemed to have shown little interest in the Islamic teachings or culture. There is no record of any Arabic works translated into Sanskrit at this time. Although the monks at the Buddhist monastic universities at that time in present-day Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent vigorously debated the assertions of the various non-Buddhist Indian tenet systems, there is no evidence that any such debates occurred with Muslim scholars. No mention of Islamic beliefs appears in any of the Sanskrit Buddhist philosophical treatises, either then or afterwards.

The singular Buddhist textual tradition that mentions any Islamic customs or beliefs is the Sanskrit *Kālacakra Tantra* literature, which emerged in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries CE.³⁴ Prior to this time, Buddhism did not seem to have viewed Islam as a rival religion. Nor was it the case that Buddhism was spreading into traditional Islamic regions and felt the need to explain the native beliefs it was encountering. Now, however, a new situation arose: Buddhist masters saw a threat to their society posed by a certain Muslim political faction. Consequently, they seem to have felt it necessary to inform their followers about the beliefs of the possible "invaders."

Kālacakra, meaning "cycles of time," is a Mahāyāna Buddhist system of tantric practice for gaining enlightenment to be able to benefit all beings as much as is possible. It describes three parallel cycles of time: external, internal, and alternative. The external cycles refer to planetary motion, astrological patterns, and historical cycles, including periodic invasions by foreign forces. Internal cycles refer to biological and psychological

rhythms. Alternative cycles are repetitive meditation practices aimed at overcoming being under the control of the external and internal cycles.

The portion of the literature that deals with the external cycles refers to the invaders as *mleccha*, the traditional Sanskrit name given to foreign invaders of the Indian subcontinent, starting with Alexander the Great and including the Kūṣāns and the Hephthalite Huns. The term connotes people speaking unintelligible non-Indic languages. *Mleccha* are characterized by their merciless invading armies. The other main term used for the invaders is “*Tāyi*,” a Sanskrit phonetic transcription of the Arabic *tayy* (plural: *tayyah*, *tayyāyē*) or the Persian form of it, *tāzi*. The Tayyayah were the strongest of the pre-Muslim Arab tribes, the Tayy’id, and “*Tāzi*” became the Persian word for Arabs.³⁵ “*Tāzi*” was the term used in reference to the Arab invaders of Iran, for example, by the last Sāsānid ruler, Yazdgerd III.³⁶

Identification of the Islamic School Mentioned in the Kālacakra Literature

The historical reference for the *mleccha* mentioned in the Kālacakra literature is not to all Arabs or to all Muslims in general, but most likely specifically to the adherents of late tenth-century CE eastern Ismā’īlī Shi’a, as followed in the Kingdom of Multān (968–1010 CE) in present-day north central Pakistan. The Kingdom of Multān was a vassal state of the Arab Ismā’īlī Fātimid Empire (910–1171 CE), centered in Egypt. Surrounding the crumbling ‘Abbāsīd Empire on both sides, the Fātimids and their Multānese vassals posed a serious threat of invasion in their quest for supremacy over the Islamic world.³⁷

The population in the ‘Abbāsīd regions immediately to the north and west of Multān — namely, present-day eastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan — included large numbers of Buddhists and Hindus at that time. From 876 to 976 CE, the entire region was under Hindu Shāhi rule. The Sunni Muslim Ghaznavids, vassals of the ‘Abbāsīds, conquered the Afghan side in 976 CE and finally overthrew the Hindu Shāhi rulers of the remaining Pakistani side in 1010 CE. The Ghaznavids were tolerant of Buddhism and Hinduism within the former Hindu Shāhi realm. Al-Bīrūnī (976–1048) CE, a Persian scholar and writer in service to the Ghaznavid court, reported that, at the turn of the millennium, the Buddhist monasteries in present-day eastern Afghanistan, including Nava Vihāra, were still functioning. The Ghaznavid rulers were intolerant, however, of Islamic sects other than their own orthodox Sunni one that they supported. They particularly regarded the Ismā’īlī Shi’a Kingdom of Multān as a threat to their rule and faith.³⁸

The List of Prophets of the Future Invaders

The main evidence supporting the hypothesis that the Tāyi *mleccha* invaders mentioned in the Kālacakra literature were the Ismā’īlīs of Multān comes from *The Regal*

*Abridged Kālacakra Tantra*³⁹ I.153. This verse presents a list of the eight prophets of the future invaders: “Adam, Noah, Abraham, and five others — Moses, Jesus, the White-Clad One, Muḥammad, and Mahdī . . . The eighth will be the blinded one. The seventh will manifestly come to the city of Baghdād in the land of Mecca, (the place) in this world where a portion of the *asura* (caste) will have the form of the powerful, merciless *mlecchas*.”⁴⁰

This list is the standard Ismā‘īlī list of seven prophets, with the addition of the White-Clad One. It can be argued that the White-Clad One is Mānī, the third-century CE founder of Manichaeism. This is because early Ismā‘īlī thinkers had some Manichaean influence from so-called “Manichaean Islam.”⁴¹ ‘Abd Allah ibn Maymun al-Qaddah (died 825 CE), for example, the alleged founder of the Ismā‘īlī faith and progenitor of the Fātimid imāms was purportedly greatly influenced by Mānī.⁴²

One possible reason for the Kālacakra list of prophets numbering eight, rather than the standard seven of the Ismā‘īlīs, is to make a parallel with the eight incarnations of Viṣṇu enumerated in the immediately preceding verse, I.152. This is suggested by the reference to the followers of the prophets as members of the *asura* caste. In Buddhist cosmology, the *asuras*, a type of jealous demigods, are rivals of the Hindu gods and always wage war against them. If there are eight incarnations of the Hindu god Viṣṇu, then there would need to be eight *asura* prophets to vie against them.

The Presentation of the *Mleccha* Beliefs and Customs

The Kālacakra texts mention some of the beliefs and customs of the Tāyi *mlecchas*. Most of these beliefs are fundamental to Islam as a whole. Some seem to be specific to the Ismā‘īlī thought of the time, while others contradict that thought. This discrepancy perhaps indicates that the compilers of the Kālacakra literature had incomplete information about the Ismā‘īlī beliefs held in Multān, and therefore filled in their account with information gleaned from other forms of Islam they had met. Alternatively, it could indicate that the theological views expressed by the main Ismā‘īlī thinker of the time — Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistani,⁴³ a strong supporter of the Fātimid state — were not yet widely disseminated in Multān. This could have been the case although al-Sijistani’s works were the official Fātimid doctrine prevalent at that time in the eastern Ismā‘īlī regions.⁴⁴

Occasionally, the Kalacakra literature explains certain features of Islam in terms of concepts familiar to a mixed Buddhist and Hindu audience. For example, Puṇḍarīka, in *Stainless Light: A Commentary Explaining “The Regal Abbreviated Kālacakra Tantra,”* explains, “Concerning the *mlecchas*, Muḥammad was an *avatār* of Raḥmān. The indicator of the *mleccha* teachings, he was the guru and master of the *mleccha* Tāyīs.”⁴⁵ In Hinduism, an *avatār* is an incarnation of the soul of a god into another form. Thus, Muḥammad being an *avatār* of Raḥmān parallels the Hindu assertion of Kṛṣṇa as an *avatār* of the god Viṣṇu. In most cases, however, the Kalacakra literature does not present the Muslim beliefs in terms deriving from Indian culture.

Creation and Obedience to Allah

The Regal Abridged Kālacakra Tantra, II.164cd, states: “Created by the Creator is everything that arises, moving and unmoving. From pleasing him, as the cause for liberation for the Tāyis, there is heaven. This is indeed the teaching of Raḥmān⁴⁶ for men.”

Puṇḍarīka elaborates in *Stainless Light: A Commentary Explaining “The Regal Abbreviated Kālacakra Tantra,”*⁴⁷ “Now, as for the assertions of the Tāyi *mlecchas*, the creator Raḥmān gives rise to every functional phenomenon, both moving and unmoving. The cause for liberation for the Tāyis, namely the white-clad *mlecchas*,⁴⁸ is pleasing Raḥmān, and this definitely brings a higher rebirth (in Paradise) for men. From not pleasing him, comes (a rebirth in) Hell. These are the teachings of Raḥmān, the assertions of the Tāyis.”

Islam in general asserts that God created the heavens and the earth. Al-Sijistani, however, elaborates the process of divine creation in a unique manner. According to his explanation, God, through His command or word, created the universal “intellect.” The universal “intellect” is an eternal, motionless, unchanging, and perfect primal being. It is an undifferentiated universal encompassing everything and is somewhat like a universal “mind,” but in the form of a being. The universal “intellect” emanated a universal “soul,” which is likewise eternal, but is always in motion and is imperfect. Within the universal “soul,” the physical world of nature emerges. The universal “soul” has two contrary dispositions: movement and rest. Within physical reality, movement creates form and rest creates matter. Matter remains inert and static, while its forms are continually in motion and changing.⁴⁹

Thus, it is perhaps in reference to al-Sijistani’s explanation of creation that *The Regal Abridged Kālacakra Tantra* notes: “Created by the Creator is everything that arises, moving and unmoving.” Although the concepts of a universal “intellect” and a universal “soul” have remained prominent in Ismā‘īlī thought, they do not occur in other forms of Islam.

Al-Sijistani, however, does not assert pleasing God — in the general Islamic sense of obeying the Shari‘ah laws or, in the general Shi‘ite and later Ismā‘īlī sense, of acknowledging the infallibility of the line of imāms — as the cause for “a higher rebirth in Paradise.” His explanation of the cause for going to Paradise is quite different.

For al-Sijistani, the universal “soul” gives rise to individual, particular souls that descend into the physical world of matter and form. Within each particular individual human being, the individual soul appropriates an individual portion of the universal “intellect,” which is thus partial and limited. The cause for going to Paradise is an individual soul’s discrimination whereby it turns away from the delights of the physical world and turns, instead, toward the pure realm of the universal “intellect.” In doing so, an individual soul learns the distinction between truth and falsity, and between good and evil.⁵⁰

Circumcision, the Ramadan Fast, and Halāl Food

Puṇḍarīka, in *The Glorious Deepest Service*,⁵¹ explains: “According to others, the cause for a higher rebirth (in Paradise) is having the skin from the tip of one’s own penis cut off and eating at the end of the day and the beginning of the night. This is certainly what the Tāyis do. They do not enjoy the flesh of cattle that have died (a natural death) by their own karma. Rather, they eat those that have been slaughtered. Otherwise, there is no going to a higher rebirth (in Paradise) for men.”

Puṇḍarīka amplifies the second part of this line in *Stainless Light*.⁵² “With a cleaver, they slit the throats of cattle with the *mleccha* God’s mantra *Bishimilla*,⁵³ and then eat the flesh of those cattle that have been slaughtered with their God’s mantra. They do not eat the flesh of those that have died (a natural death) by their own karma.”

These passages indicate the general Islamic customs of circumcision, eating only after sunset during the Ramaḍān fast, and obeying the injunctions concerning the restrictions of the *halāl* dietary laws. Puṇḍarīka, in *Stainless Light*,⁵⁴ however, mistakenly takes the *halāl* method of slaughter to signify a sacrifice to God, similar to the Vedic ritual. Addressing himself to a Hindu audience, Puṇḍarīka states, “You will consider that (Tāyi) teaching to be valid, because of the words in your (Vedic) scriptures, ‘Employ cattle for the sake of sacrifice.’ ”

Ethics, Prayer, and Injunction against Statues of God

In *The Essence of the Further Tantra of the Glorious Kālacakra Tantra*,⁵⁵ it is stated, “In keeping with the teachings of those whose women wear veils . . . the hordes of Tāyi horsemen destroy in battle any statues of gods there may be, without exception. They have one caste, do not steal, and speak the truth. They keep clean, avoid others’ wives, follow definite ascetic practices, and remain faithful to their own wives. (First) having washed themselves, then, at an individually desired time during the pitch-black night and at noon, twilight, mid-afternoon, and when the sun rises over the mountains, the Tāyi non-Buddhists⁵⁶ pay homage five times (each day), prostrating on the ground facing their holy land and taking singular refuge in the ‘Lord of Those with *Tamas*’⁵⁷ in the heavenly realm above the earth.”

Here, the Kālacakra text also explains beliefs common to all Muslims: not making “idolatrous” statues, honoring the equality of all men in Islam, keeping strict ethics, and praying five times a day.

Although the above cited quotation indicates the general Muslim response to statues believed to represent a god and worshipped as an idol, nevertheless the Islamic world was also struck by the beauty of many of these statues and of the monasteries and temples that contained them. Persian poetry of the time, for example, often used the simile for palaces that they were “as beautiful as a Nowbahar (Nava Vihāra).”⁵⁸ Further, at Nava Vihāra and Bāmiyān, Buddha images, particularly of Maitreya, the future Buddha, had moon discs behind their heads. This led to the poetic depiction of pure beauty as someone having “the moon-shaped face of a Buddha.”⁵⁹ Thus, although the

Persian term, *but* or *bot*, deriving from the Sogdian *purt*, was used for both Buddha and an idolatrous statue,⁶⁰ and the Arabic term for Buddha, *al-Budd*, was also used for all idols from India,⁶¹ nevertheless early eleventh-century Persian poems, such as *Varqa va Golsbāb* by ‘Ayyuqī, used the word *bot* with a positive connotation for “Buddha,” and not with its second, derogatory meaning as “idol.” It implies the ideal of asexual beauty in both men and women.⁶²

The Afterlife

When it came to the discussion of the nature of the afterlife and the effect on it by a person’s deeds in this life, the Kālacakra texts did not merely report the Tāyī *mleccha* assertion. They felt it necessary to point out its contradiction with the Buddhist beliefs. *The Regal Abbreviated Kālacakra Tantra*, II.174, states: “Through an (eternal) afterlife, a person experiences (the results of his) earlier committed karmic actions of this world. If that were so, then depletion of humans’ karma from one birth to another would not occur. There would be no exiting from *saṃsāra* and no entering into liberation even in terms of immeasurable existence. That thought, indeed, appears among the Tāyīs, although dismissed by other groups.”

Puṇḍarīka elaborates on this passage in *Stainless Light*.⁶³ “The assertion of the *mleccha* Tāyīs is that humans who die experience happiness or suffering in a higher rebirth (in Paradise) or in Hell with their human bodies, through Raḥmān’s decision.”

This passage refers to the general Islamic belief in the Day of Judgment, when all men will rise from the dead in their human bodies and will be judged by God. Based on their past deeds, they will pass to either eternal happiness in Paradise or eternal suffering in Hell, still retaining their human bodies. The Ismā‘īlī tenet, however, as formulated by al-Sijistānī, denies the resurrection of the human body. According to al-Sijistānī, the happiness of Paradise and the suffering of Hell are experienced purely mentally by the individual soul, without any physical aspect.⁶⁴

Buddhism, on the other hand, with its teachings of karma, asserts recurring rebirth by the force of one’s karmic actions motivated by disturbing emotions and attitudes. Destructive actions, motivated by anger, greed, attachment, or naivety about behavioral cause and effect, result in rebirth in a hell, or as a ghost, or an animal. Naivety may be due to either lack of knowledge or an incorrect understanding. Constructive actions, but still associated with naivety about reality, result in rebirth as a human, an *asura* demigod, or as a worldly god in a heaven. Each of these types of rebirth that anyone may experience — including rebirth in a heaven or a hell — has its own type of body specific to that realm. One cannot be reborn in a heaven or a hell with a human body.

Moreover, Buddhism teaches that the karmic aftermath of any karmic deed ripens into happiness or suffering for only a limited period of time. Once that karmic aftermath has finished ripening, it is depleted. One then dies from a heavenly or hellish rebirth and is reborn in yet another *saṃsāric* realm. From a Buddhist point of view, rebirth in a heaven or a hell cannot be eternal. However, one’s recurring *saṃsāric* rebirths will

continue eternally, one after the next, unless one completely rids oneself of their true causes. Moreover, even the happiness of a heavenly rebirth is a form of suffering, since it never satisfies and eventually comes to an end.

Thus, Buddhism teaches that if one rids oneself of all disturbing emotions and attitudes, one stops committing karmic actions that would lead to continuing saṃsāric rebirth, whether in a heaven, a hell, on this earth, or elsewhere. Likewise, one gets rid of the karmic aftermath already accumulated. Then, on the basis of constructive deeds done without any naivety about reality, one gains an eternal, peaceful, joyous state of *nirvāṇa*, liberation from recurring saṃsāric rebirth. There is no Day of Judgment and no judge. Continuing saṃsāric rebirth is not a punishment, and the attainment of *nirvāṇa* is not a reward. The connection between behavioral cause and effect operates purely in a mechanical way, without divine involvement.

The main issue that the Buddhist texts dispute, then, is that heavenly rebirth is the ultimate spiritual goal and the final attainment that any person can reach, since this contradicts the central Buddhist assertion of final liberation from karma and rebirth.⁶⁵

The Atomic Nature of Matter and the Nature of the Soul

Concerning some other points, the Kālacakra literature attempts to put the *mleccha* assertions into a Buddhist context in order to make them more understandable to its audience. For example, the nineteenth-century CE Tibetan commentator Mipam, in his *Illumination of the Vajra Sun, Clarifying the Meaning of the Words of "The Glorious Kālacakra Tantra": Commentary to Chapter (Five), Deep Awareness*,⁶⁶ explains: "The *mlecchas* have two (philosophical points) that they hold. They hold external phenomena to have the nature of a collection of atoms, and they hold the existence of a self of a person that temporarily takes birth or that has an aspect that takes birth in *saṃsāra*. The goal is to achieve the happiness of the gods as the fruit. Aside from this, they do no assert any other type of *nirvāṇa*."

Mipam goes on to point out that the *mleccha* assertion of the atomic nature of matter fits into the Buddhist beliefs. He explains that the Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika schools of Hīnayāna Buddhism assert indivisible, partless atoms; while the Chittamātra and Madhyāmaka schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism assert atoms that are endlessly divisible.

Mipam does not elaborate on the Muslim position concerning atoms; however, among the philosophical views that had developed within Islam before the mid-tenth century CE, certain writers also asserted indivisible atoms. They included al-Ḥakam and al-Nazzām, within the Mu'tazili school of disputation, and the Sunni theologian al-Ash'arī. Most other Islamic theologians of that time, as well as afterwards, asserted atoms as being infinitely divisible. Al-Sijistani, however, seems to be unclear about the divisibility of atoms.⁶⁷

Mipam continues, "Knowing their dispositions and thoughts, Buddha taught *sūtras* of what they (the Tāyis) could accept. For instance, in *The Sūtra of Carrying Responsibility*,⁶⁸ Buddha said that persons carrying responsibility (for their actions) do exist, but

without speaking of the soul of a person as being either permanent or impermanent. These points are true on the face of their (Tāyi) assertions. Buddha's intended meaning is that persons do exist as continuities of a self that bears responsibility for *karma*, but which is merely imputed onto a continuum and, by nature, is neither permanent nor impermanent."

Buddhism teaches that there is a finite, but uncountable number of individual persons and of mental continuums. An individual person is something imputed on an individual mental continuum, much like a habit can be imputed on a continuum of repeated forms of similar behavior.

The continuity of each individual person, like the continuity of each individual mental continuum, is eternal, but nonstatic. These continuities are eternal, in the sense of having no beginning and no end. However, they are nonstatic in the sense of changing from moment to moment. In each moment, each person does something different, such as cognizing a different object.

While under the influence of naivety, each person commits karmic actions and bears responsibility for those actions. The karmic legacies of these actions ripen into the person's experience of *saṃsāric* happiness or suffering through a continuity of rebirths. When a person is able to maintain continuous correct awareness of reality, the person becomes liberated from ever experiencing the ripening of these legacies. In this way, the continuity of the *saṃsāric* existence of that person ceases forever and the person attains liberation, *nirvāṇa*. Nevertheless, the ever-changing continuity of that individual person and of the mental continuum on which that individual person is imputed, go on eternally, even after the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.

In short, according to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Buddhist branch to which Kālacakra belongs, an individual person is not permanent in the sense of being static; nor is an individual person impermanent in the sense of being temporary. Moreover, the *saṃsāric* existence of an individual person is not permanent in the sense of being eternal; nor is the *nirvāṇic* existence of an individual person impermanent in the sense of being temporary.

Mipam's description of the *mleccha* assertions concerning the soul fits loosely with al-Sijistani's explanations. Al-Sijistani also asserts that persons — in this case, souls — bear responsibility for their actions and are neither permanent nor impermanent. However, the metaphysical basis for his assertions is quite different from the Buddhist one. The universal "soul" is not permanent in the sense of being static, but rather it is in constant motion and flux. Nevertheless, it is also not impermanent in the sense of being temporary, but rather it is eternal.

According to al-Sijistani, all individual souls of men are "aspects" of the same universal "soul," in the sense of being parts or portions of it. When an individual soul leaves a human body, its temporary bodily existence comes to an end. It reverts to the undifferentiated universal "soul" and does not take further bodily rebirth before the Day of Judgment. Nevertheless, an individual disembodied soul somehow retains its individuality. At the time of resurrection and judgment, the individual soul attains the

mental pleasures of eternal Paradise if it has gained sufficient rational knowledge of the truth, through its association with an individual intellect while embodied. If the individual soul remained enmeshed in corporeal sensuality while embodied and did not acquire rational knowledge of the truth, it attains eternal mental tortures in Hell.

Thus, the individual soul is not permanent, in the sense that it is not eternally in its embodied state. However, it is also not impermanent, in the sense that after resurrection and judgment, it continues forever, bearing responsibility for its actions while embodied.⁶⁹

The Ghaznavid Dynasty (975–1187 CE)

There is no evidence that, after the emergence of the Kālacakra literature in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries CE, Muslim scholars became aware of the descriptions contained in it of their beliefs. Interest in Buddhism, however, persisted among them, as seen in several historical works; while, aside from Kālacakra exegetical commentaries, further Buddhist interest in Islam in the centuries that followed was nil.

For example, during the Ghaznavid Dynasty, the Persian historian, al-Bīrūnī, accompanied Maḥmūd of Ghazni on his early eleventh century CE invasion of the Indian subcontinent. Based on what he learned there, al-Bīrūnī wrote *A Book about India*.⁷⁰ In it, he described the basic Buddhist customs and beliefs and noted that the Indians regarded Buddha as a prophet. That does not mean, of course, that he was suggesting that Muslims accept Buddha as a prophet of God, but it does indicate that he understood that Buddhists do not assert Śākyamuni as their God. Serving under the Seljuk Dynasty, al-Shahrastānī repeated al-Bīrūnī's account of Buddhism in his twelfth-century CE work, *The Book of Religions and Creeds*.⁷¹

We can also find continuing examples of literary borrowings from Buddhism into Islamic literature during the Ghaznavid period. For instance, the Buddhist image of a group of blind men each describing an elephant differently, based on each touching a separate part of the animal, found its way into Sufism in the writings of the Persian scholar Ābū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 CE).⁷² Advocating philosophical skepticism, al-Ghazālī used the image to illustrate how Islamic theologians possess only partial truth, while Buddha used it in *The Sutta of the Non-Buddhist Sects*⁷³ to demonstrate the futility of the non-Buddhist philosophers debating their views with each other.

The Ilkhanid Dynasty (1258–1336 CE)

In 1258 CE, Hülegü, a grandson of Chinggis Khan, conquered Iran and overthrew the 'Abbāsid Caliphate in Baghdad and established the Ilkhanid Dynasty. Hülegü followed the Tibetan form of Buddhism and soon invited to his court in northwestern Iran Buddhist monks from Tibet, Kashmir, and Ladakh.⁷⁴ The sixth Ilkhan, however, Ghazan (r. 1295–1304 CE), converted from Buddhism to Islam with the Sufi master Ṣadr ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm. Nevertheless, when he commissioned his minister, Rashīd al-Dīn, to write *A Compendium of Histories*,⁷⁵ he instructed him to include descriptions of the belief

systems of the various peoples whom the Mongols had encountered, including Buddhism. Thus, he invited to his court Bakṣi Kamalaśrī, a Buddhist monk from Kashmīr, to assist Rashīd al-Dīn with his work. The result of their collaboration was *The Life and Teachings of Buddha*, which appeared, in both Arabic and Persian versions, as section three of *A History of India*, the second volume of *A Compendium of Histories*.

Like the previous works by al-Kirmāni and al-Bīrūnī, Rashīd al-Dīn explained Buddhism in Muslim terms. Thus, he listed Buddha as one of the six religious founders accepted as prophets by the Indians: three theistic — Śīva, Viṣṇu, and Brahma — and three non-theistic — Arhanta for Jainism, Nāstika for the Cārvāka system, and Śākyamuni for Buddhism. He also referred to the *deva* gods as angels, and Māra as Iblīs, the Devil. The text also mentions the six rebirth realms, the laws of karmic cause and effect, and that the words of the Buddha were preserved in the *Kangyur*, the collection of their Tibetan translations.

Rashīd al-Dīn also reported that in his day, eleven Buddhist texts in Arabic translation were circulating in Iran. These included Mahāyāna texts such as *The Sūtra on the Array of the Pure Land of Bliss*⁷⁶ concerning Amitābha's Pure Land, *The Sūtra on the Array Like a Woven Basket*⁷⁷ concerning Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of compassion, and *An Exposition on Maitreya*⁷⁸ concerning Maitreya, the future Buddha and embodiment of love. Some aspects of Rashīd al-Dīn's description, however, were quite fanciful. For instance, he claimed that before Islam, the people of Mecca and Medina were Buddhists and worshipped idols resembling Buddha in the Kaaba.⁷⁹

A little over a century later, in the early fifteenth century CE, Hāfiz-i Abru, serving in the court of Shāhrukh of the Tīmūrid Dynasty in Samarkand, compiled *A Collection of Histories*.⁸⁰ The section in it concerning Buddha and Buddhism based itself on Rashīd al-Dīn's work.

Although histories of India written by Muslim scholars include descriptions of the Buddhist beliefs, we do not find comparable accounts of the Islamic beliefs in histories of India written by Tibetan or Mongolian Buddhist authors after the spread of Islam in India. For example, in *A History of Buddhism in India*⁸¹ by the early seventeenth-century CE Tibetan scholar Tāranātha, the author described the early thirteenth-century CE destruction of the Buddhist monasteries of central North India by the Muslim armies of the Guzz Turks during the Ghūrid Dynasty. Nevertheless, he remained completely silent about Islam itself.⁸²

Present Prospects

Although Muslim scholars of the past have shown repeated interest in gaining knowledge of Buddhism, while Buddhist scholars have shown comparatively less interest in learning about Islam, this situation is slowly changing at present. In a lecture delivered in Milano, Italy, in December 2007, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has exhibited very clearly this changing attitude:

Since September 11, although I'm a Buddhist, an outsider to Islam, nevertheless I have been voluntarily making efforts as a defender of Great Islam. Many of my

Muslim brothers — very few sisters — explain to me that if anyone creates bloodshed, this is not Islam. The reason is that a true Muslim, a true follower of Islam, should have love toward entire creation the same as he or she has love toward Allah. All creatures are created by Allah. If one respects and loves Allah, one must love all His creatures.

One reporter friend of mine spent time in Tehran at the time of Ayatollah Khomeini. Later, he told me how the mullah there collected money from wealthy families and distributed it to poorer people to help with education and poverty. This is the real socialist process. In Muslim countries, bank interest is discouraged. So, if we know Islam and we see how followers of Islam implement it sincerely, then like all other religions, it is truly wonderful. In general if we know others' religions, we can develop mutual respect, admiration, and enrichment. Therefore, we need constant effort to promote religious interfaith understanding.⁸³

Muslim scholars and religious leaders have also shown growing interest in interfaith understanding and dialogue. Thus, various international organizations have convened Buddhist-Muslim conferences in recent years. For example, in September 2008 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, the Global Family for Love and Peace, in cooperation with the Museum of World Religions in Taipei, Taiwan, sponsored the tenth in its series of Buddhist-Muslim dialogues, "Towards a Global Family," commemorating the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Previous conferences in this series have included "A Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue Conference on Global Ethics and Good Governance" at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, in May 2003 CE and a symposium on "Dharma, Allah and Governance: A Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue" in July 2004 CE in Barcelona, Spain, as part of the Parliament of the World Religions.⁸⁴ Buddhist and Muslim leaders both agree that interfaith understanding, fostered through such dialogues and conferences, will undoubtedly contribute greatly to religious harmony and world peace.

Endnotes

1. Dr. Alexander Berzin, Director of Berzin Archives e.V. and international lecturer on Buddhist philosophy, received his Ph.D. in 1972 from Harvard University, Departments of Far Eastern Languages and Sanskrit and Indian Studies. He worked as a founding member of the Translation Bureau of the Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, Dharamsala, India, for 29 years and served as occasional interpreter for H.H. the Dalai Lama. Currently living in Berlin, Germany, he primarily prepares his collected works for online publication on www.berzinarchives.com. He has published 17 books (mostly on Tibetan Buddhism) and his works have been translated into 18 languages. He is the author of the eBook *The Historical Interaction between the Buddhist and Islamic Cultures before the Mongol Empire*.

2. Alexander Berzin, *Indian Society and Thought before and at the Time of Buddha* (http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/history_buddhism/buddhism_india/indian_society_thought_time_buddha_.html).

3. Alexander Berzin, *A Brief History of Buddhism in India before the Thirteenth-Century Invasions* (http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/history_buddhism/buddhism_india/history_buddhism_india_before.html).

4. Cf. Alexander Berzin, *Historical Sketch of Buddhism and Islam in Afghanistan* (http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/history_buddhism/buddhism_central_asia/history_afghanistan_buddhism.html) and *Historical Sketch of Buddhism and Islam in West Turkistan* (http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/islam/historical_interaction/overviews/hist_sketch_west_turkistan.html). Cf. also K.N. Dikshit, "Buddhist Centres in Afghanistan," in *India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture*, eds. Lokesh Chandra, *et al.* (Madras: Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee, 1970), 229–238 and B.A. Litvinsky, "India and Soviet Central Asia," *ibid.*, 263–274.
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10. S.M. Yusuf, "The Early Contacts between Islam and Buddhism," *University of Ceylon Review*, 13 (Jan 1955): 1–28.
11. Arabic: *Tarīkh al-Rusul wa ul-Mulūk*, also known by its abbreviated name *Tarīkh al-Ṭabarī*.
12. Ar. *Abmara*.
13. W.H. Siddiqi, W. H. "India's Contribution to Arab Civilization" in *India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture*, *op.cit.*, 579–588.
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15. Margaret Smith, "The Doctrine of Reincarnation in Persian Thought," *The Aryan Path* 14 (Jan 1943): 10–15.
16. Ar. *Ka'bab*.
17. Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "The Buddhist Ritual in the Literature of Early Islamic Iran," in *South Asian Archeology 1981*, ed. B. Allchin (Cambridge, 1984), 272–279.
18. Ar. *Kitāb al-Buldān*.
19. W.H. Siddiqi, *op.cit.*
20. Ar. *Bayt al-Hikmah*.
21. Skt. *Siddhasāra*. Kevin van Bladel, "The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids," paper delivered at the conference "Islam and Tibet: Cultural Interactions," Warburg Institute. London, 18 November 2006.
22. Ar. *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nibal*.
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26. Skt. *Jātakamālā*.
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31. Cf. Alexander Berzin, *The Kalachakra Presentation of the Prophets of the Non-Indic Invaders (Full Analysis)* (http://www.berzinarchives.com/cms/en/archives/study/islam/kalachakra_islam/kalachakra_presentation_prophets_in/kc_pres_prophets_islam_full.html).

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34. For a general introduction to Kālacakra and its literature, cf. Geshe Lhundup Sopa, Roger Jackson, and John Newman, *The Wheel of Time: The Kālacakra in Context* (Madison, Wisconsin: Deer Park Books, 1985).

35. Berzin, *The Kalachakra Presentation of the Prophets of the Non-Indic Invaders (Full Analysis), op.cit.*

36. Cf. "Letter from Yazgird III" (<http://www.bozorgbazgasht.com/yazdgird.html>).

37. Alexander Berzin, "A Buddhist View of Islam," in *Islam and Inter-faith Relations: The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2006, op.cit.*, 225–251.

38. Cf. Berzin, *Historical Sketch of Buddhism and Islam in Afghanistan, op.cit.*

39. Skt. *Laghu-kālacakra-tantra-rāja* (Tib. *bsDus-pa'i rgyud-kyi rgyal-po dus-kyi 'khor-lo*) or, as presented with its full title in the *sDe-dge bsTan-'gyur*, vol. 11, 1A, Skt. *Śrīmad-ādibuddhodbhṛta-śrīkālacakra-nāma-tantra-rāja* (Tib. *mChog-gi dang-po'i sangs-rgyas-las phung-ba rgyud-kyi rgyal-po dpal dus-kyi 'khor-lo*). Biswanath Banerjee, ed., *A Critical Edition of Śrī Kālacakratantra-rāja (Collated with the Tibetan Version)*, *Bibliotheca Indica*, Series 311 (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1985), 39.

40. For a fuller analysis, cf. Berzin, *The Kalachakra Presentation of the Prophets of the Non-Indic Invaders, Full Analysis, op.cit.*

41. Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

42. Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam, with a Life of the Prophet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 332.

43. Lived mid- to late tenth-century CE.

44. Cf. Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'īlis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 240 ff.

45. Skt. *Vimalaprabhā-nāma-laghu-kālacakra-tantra-rāja-ṭīkā* (Tib. *bsDus-pa'i rgyud-kyi rgyal-po dus-kyi 'khor-lo'i 'grel-bshad dri-ma med-pa'i 'od*), *sDe-dge bsTan-'gyur*, vol. 11, 91A.

46. Arabic for "compassionate one" and epithet of Allah.

47. *sDe-dge bsTan-'gyur*, vol. 12, 20A–B.

48. The reference to the Tāyis as being clad in white may perhaps refer to Muslim pilgrims wearing simple white robes during the *Hajj* to Mecca.

49. Cf. Paul E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shi'ism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 81 ff. Cf. also, Daftary, *op.cit.*, 241 ff.

50. Walker, *op.cit.*, 95 ff.

51. Skt. *Śrīparamārtha-sevā* (Tib. *dPal don-dam-pa'i bsnyen-pa*), *sDe-dge bsTan-'gyur*, vol. 13, 17B.

52. *sDe-dge bsTan-'gyur*, vol. 11, 129A.

53. Ar. *Bismillab*, "in the name of God."

54. *sDe-dge bsTan-'gyur*, vol. 11, 129A.

55. Skt. *Śrī-kālacakra-tantrōttaratāntra-hṛdaya* (Tib. *dPal dus-kyi 'khor-lo'i rgyud phyi-ma rgyud-kyi snying-po*), *sDe-dge bKa'-gyur*, vol. 77, 141B.

56. Skt. *tirthika*.

57. According to *The Regal Abbreviated Kālacakra Tantra*, I.153, the prophets Moses, Jesus, Mānī, Muḥammad ad, and Mahdī are “Those with the *Tamas*.” *Tamas* is one of the three constituent features (Skt. *triguṇa*) into which the Indian Sāṃkhya philosophical system divides the universe.
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62. Cf. Melikian-Chirvani, “The Buddhist Ritual in the Literature of Early Islamic Iran,” *op.cit.*
63. *sDe-dge bsTan-gyur*, vol. 12, 26B–27A.
64. Walker, *op.cit.*, 134.
65. Berzin, “A Buddhist View of Islam,” *op.cit.*
66. Mi-pham ‘Jam-dbyangs rnam-rgyal rgya-mtsho. *dPal dus-kyi ‘khor-lo’i rgyud-kyi tshig-don rab-tu gsal-byed rdo-rje nyi-ma’i snang-ba, Ye-sbes le’u’i ‘grel-chen*, 117B.
67. Ibrahim K. Taufik, “Ancient Heritage in Kalam Philosophy,” in *Values in Islamic Culture and the Experience of History*, ed. Nur Kirabaev and Yuriy Pochta, *Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change*, Series IVA, *Eastern and Central Europe*, vol. 13, Series IIA, *Islam*, vol. 9 (Washington D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2002).
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69. Cf. Walker, *op.cit.*, 134 ff.
70. Arabic: *Kitāb al-Hind*.
71. Arabic: *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihal*.
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Buddhism in the Iranian World¹

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The “Iranian World,” defined as the Iranian plateau and adjacent regions historically inhabited by Iranian-speaking peoples or influenced by their culture, played an important role in the development and transmission of Buddhism especially during the early centuries. Like other world religions, Buddhism spread via trade routes and absorbed local influences along the way.² A Pali legend suggests that the first individuals to spread the Buddha’s teaching outside of India were a pair of traveling businessmen from Balkh, Tapassu and Bhallika, who were present at the Buddha’s famous sermon at the deer park near Benaras; as natives of the east Iranian province of Bactria these men would likely have been ethnic Iranians. Whether or not this particular legend has any historical validity, the region in question (now Afghanistan) became one of the main centres of Buddhism and remained so up to the Islamic conquests in the 7th century. The process of Islamization took several centuries, and since the population of eastern Iran was mostly Buddhist, this meant that converts to Islam brought with them a Buddhist cultural background.

The Rise and Spread of Buddhism in Eastern Iran

The Indian emperor Ashoka Maurya (r. 273–232 BCE) commissioned a number of Buddhist inscriptions on rocks and pillars throughout his realm, stretching across northern India to the eastern fringes of the Greek Seleucid Empire which had replaced the Persian Achaemenids only half a century earlier. At least six of Ashoka’s inscriptions in northwestern India included translations into Aramaic, the language of the erstwhile Achaemenid bureaucracy and thus presumably aimed at Iranians. His royal edicts explicitly call for missionaries to spread the *dharmā* to the Kambojas (Iranians) and the Yonas (Greeks). The Aramaic translations of Ashoka’s edicts show some conscious attempt to add an Iranian flavour, such as frequent insertions of the qualifier “good” (a likely reference to “the good religion” of the Zoroastrians) and the deletion of references to *devas*, considered minor deities by Indians but abhorred as devils in Zoroastrianism.

This northwestern region of the Indian Subcontinent — roughly what is now Pakistan — was the transition zone between Iran and the Indian world, just as

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Mesopotamia was between Iran and the Semitic sphere. In the wake of Alexander's conquest Greek culture was added to the mix. Later the region would succumb to successive waves of Iranian and Turkish Central Asians seeking to control the trade networks, thereby bringing yet more cultural elements into this cosmopolitan environment. Buddhism, strengthened by its involvement in the long-distance trading economy, became the major religion in the area and would remain so up to the Arab conquests in the seventh century CE. But as a developing worldview, Buddhism in northwestern India was subject to influences emanating from all the diverse peoples of the region.

After the fall of the Maurya dynasty in the early second century BCE the eastern Iran-northwestern India border zone became an often unstable playing field on which various groups competed for power. These were mainly the Parthians from northeastern Iran; the Sakas (Scythians), an originally nomadic Iranian people from the Eurasian steppes; and the Kushans, who also spoke an Iranian language (Bactrian) but were originally from the eastern part of Inner Asia and may have been partially descended from the Indo-European-speaking Tokharians. Each of these groups practiced religious tolerance, facilitating the co-mingling of ideas and the blending of traditions.

Buddhism's flourishing and development was due mainly to the support of traveling merchants who would make donations to Buddhist monasteries (*viharas*), and shrines (*stupas*), which usually contained relics associated with the Buddha. The economic and religious significance of the stupas carried over into the Muslim period and continues to the present day in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Muslim shrines to Sufi saints, like the stupas before them, are sites for pilgrimage and the main centers of popular religion. A symbol of this continuity can be seen in the banners once flown by Iranian Buddhists from the tops of the stupas, and which continue to adorn the cupolas of Sufi shrines in the region today.

In the centuries before the Arab conquests Buddhism was spread throughout the eastern Iranian world. Buddhist sites have been found in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as well as within Iran itself. It has long been known that the region of Bactria — what is now the northern part of Afghanistan and which remains largely Persian-speaking — was an important Buddhist center in the pre-Islamic period. What is only recently emerging, mainly from archaeological work in Turkemenistan, is the important role played by Parthians in transmitting Buddhism centuries earlier. Although Chinese sources mention a number of important Buddhist monks who came from Parthia, such as the second-century translator of Buddhist texts An Shigao, most western Buddhologists have considered that Buddhism only caught on in a minor way in Parthia itself.

Archaeological work during the Soviet period tells a different story, however. Both the volume and distinctiveness of Buddhist artifacts from Parthian sites suggests a strong Buddhist presence there during Parthian and Kushan times, from around the first century until the third century when Sasanian power brought an increased support for Zoroastrianism.

Mariko Namba Walter has supported the view of Soviet scholarship, pointing out that Western scholars have only recently become aware of the extent of Soviet-era finds.³ She notes that the Museum of Turkmen history in Ashgabat is full of Buddhist objects excavated from the Marv region, a once important trading center along the Silk Road until its destruction by the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Some one hundred Buddhist rock inscriptions — mainly dedications — have been found in Margiana, dating from the first century BCE through the fifth century CE. Sanskrit texts of the Sarvastivadin school, dating to the fifth century, have also been discovered there. Unfortunately, because scholarly work in Turkmenistan has slowed dramatically since the country's independence in 1991, most of this material remains unstudied and its significance poorly understood.

Western scholars have tended to see Buddhism as having been transmitted from Gandhara (northwestern India) directly to China via cities such as Khotan and Kucha in the Tarim Basin. Although one vector of transmission appears indeed to have gone this way over the rigorous passes of the Karakorum Mountains, there is evidence of a western “detour” through Parthia as well. Though there are no surviving Buddhist texts in Parthian, the evolution of Buddhist terms in other languages suggests that at least in some cases, Buddhism was transmitted to China via Parthia. This would help explain why so many important Buddhist translators in China were of Parthian origin.

If Buddhism was prevalent in Parthia, which was centered in the northeastern part of the Iranian world, it is not clear how far its influence penetrated into the areas further west. Echoes of Buddhist ideas have been seen in some aspects of Christianity, and though the evidence for this is still rather foggy it is a fact that India and the Mediterranean were culturally connected (mainly through trade), and that this connection passed through Iran. Since Buddhism was strongly associated with trading activity, communities of Buddhist merchants from India lived in or traveled through western Iran. It is not known how successful the expatriate Indians were in winning converts to Buddhism in western Iran and Mesopotamia, but it would seem that the numbers of Buddhists in the west were far less than in the east.

Buddhism in Western Iran

The evidence for Buddhists in western Iran is limited. In two official inscriptions the fanatical Sasanian high priest Kerdir (Kartir), who lived in the third century, mentions *sramanas* (Buddhist monks) among those non-Zoroastrians he hopes to eliminate throughout Iran, meaning of course that such people existed in the country at the time. There are elements of Buddhist iconography in some Sasanian-period art. At Taq-e Bostan, for example, Mithra is seen standing on a lotus. Buddhist rock-cut monuments have been identified at Chehelkhaneh and Haidari in the southern Iranian province of Fars, and recently nineteen Buddha statues, in the Gandhara style, were discovered there.⁴ Similar caves at Rasatkhaneh and Varjuvi in Azerbaijan may have been Buddhist sites as well, most likely later during the Mongol period.⁵

Place names give a further clue. A number of villages in western Khorasan — and even as far west as Rayy near modern Tehran — bear the name No Bahar, which is derived from Sanskrit *nava vibhara* or “new [Buddhist] monastery.”⁶ Along the southern Iranian coast as well, the names Chah Bahar in Baluchistan and Botkhaneh [“Buddha-house”] and Baharistan in Fars attest to the passage of Buddhist traders from India. Tiz, on the Baluch coast near the border of Pakistan, is mentioned in the *Chach-nameh* (a thirteenth-century history of Sind) as having had a substantial Buddhist community as late as the twelfth century, and may even have had a Buddhist administration in early Islamic times.

Iranian Buddhism

One of the most striking examples of Iranian-Buddhist syncretism is an image of the Buddha found in Qara Tepe, Afghanistan which bears the inscription “Buddha Mazda.” This Kushan period wall painting shows the Buddha surrounded by flames, apparently an evocation of Ahura Mazda himself.

The archaeological remains of Buddhist stupas and monasteries throughout Bactria are supplemented by the many descriptions of Iranian Buddhist sites in the accounts of Buddhist travelers from China and elsewhere. The most famous of these is undoubtedly Xuanzang (d. 664), a Chinese Buddhist monk who traveled via Central Asia to India in hopes of finding authentic Sanskrit texts and bringing them back to China. Xuanzang states that in his time Balkh had about one hundred Buddhist monasteries and some three thousand monks, all belonging to schools of the “Lesser Vehicle” (Hinayana). His account takes note of the economic importance of these monasteries, which were often raided by nomadic armies:

Outside the city, towards the southwest, there is a monastery called Navasangharama, which was built by a former king of this country. The Masters, who dwell to the north of the great Snowy Mountains, and are authors of the Shastras, occupy this monastery only, and continue their estimable labors in it. There is a figure of the Buddha here, which is lustrous with noted gems, and the hall in which it stands is also adorned with precious substances of rare value. This is the reason why it has often been robbed by chieftains of neighbouring countries, covetous of gain.

This monastery also contains a statue of Vaishravana Deva, by whose spiritual influence, in unexpected ways, there is protection afforded to the precincts of the monastery. Lately the son of Khan Yeh-hu, belonging to the Turks, becoming rebellious, Yeh-hu Khan broke up his camping ground, and marched at the head of the horde to make a foray against this monastery, desiring to obtain the jewels and precious things with which it was enriched. Having encamped his army in the open ground, not far from the monastery, in the night he had a dream. He saw Vaishravana Deva, who addressed him thus: ‘What power do you possess that you dare to overthrow this monastery?’ and then hurling his lance, he transfixed him with it. The Khan, affrighted, awoke, and his heart penetrated with sorrow, he told his dream to his followers, and then, to atone somewhat for his fault, he hastened

to the monastery to ask permission to confess his crime to the monks, but before he received an answer he died.⁷

Xuanzang then goes on to elaborate on the valuable relics contained in the monastery, which were objects of veneration for local Buddhists:

Within the monastery, in the southern hall of the Buddha, there is the washing basin which Buddha used. It contains about a peck, and is of various colors, which dazzle the eyes. It is difficult to name the gold and stone of which it is made. Again, there is a tooth of Buddha about an inch long, and about eight or nine tenths of an inch in breadth. Its color is yellowish white; it is pure and shining. Again, there is the sweeping brush of Buddha, made of the kasha plant. It is about two feet long and about seven inches round. Its handle is ornamented with various gems. These three relics are presented with offerings on each of the six fast-days by the assembly of lay and monastic believers. Those who have the greatest faith in worship see the objects emitting a radiance of glory.⁸

Clearly the Buddhist community of Balkh was more taken with miracles and ritual than with the sort of individual mental discipline originally taught by the Buddha a millennium or more earlier, but this was surely not atypical. It is hardly surprising that according to Xuanzang, the monks of Balkh were so irregular in their observance of the monastic code (*vinaya*) “that it is hard to tell saints from sinners.”

The close ties between Buddhist monks and government officials is also attested in an inscription which adorned the entrance to the No Bahar shrine, no longer extant but reported by the tenth-century Muslim historian Mas‘udi in his book *Golden Meadows*:

The Buddha said, ‘The courts of princes require three qualities: intelligence, reliability, and wealth.’

Beneath this inscription, according to Mas‘udi, someone had written in Arabic:

The Buddha lied. What any free man possessing one of these qualities must do is avoid the court at all costs.⁹

A memory of the fabulous riches and adornment associated with the Buddhist shrines and statues of eastern Iran is preserved in the tradition of Persian Muslim poetry, which first took shape in precisely that part of the Iranian world where Buddhism had prevailed until the coming of Islam. The idealized “beloved” about whom the poets write (normally conceived of not as a girl but as an adolescent boy) is often described as a “moon-faced idol” (*bot* — literally, a buddha), and sometimes in terms of other details such as having “a body of silver,” recalling the fact that buddha statues were often covered in silver paint. According to A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, “the poetic archetype of the idol [in Persian poetry] responds trait for trait to the artistic archetype of the eastern Iranian buddha.”¹⁰ Likewise, the poetic expression *ey bot* (“oh, beauty!”) is a secular survival of the sacred Buddhist invocation *abo Buddhho*.¹¹

Iranian Influences in Buddhism

The subtle infusion of Iranian ideas into the spreading Buddhist tradition is most apparent in the contexts of Central Asian Iranian peoples such as the Sogdians of

Transoxiana and the Sakas of Khotan. For example, Khotanese translations of *dharmā* used the Iranian term *data* when referring to the Buddha's law. The term *Buddha-datu*, or "Buddha-law," may be compared with the earlier Zoroastrian *mazdo-data* (Mazda's law). Khotanese texts likewise employ the Iranian notion of *kbvarna/farr* (Khotanese *pharra*) to mean "good fortune resulting from following the Buddha's path." Gandharan Buddhist art from the Kushan period occasionally employs the *kbvarna* symbolism of flames rising from the Buddha's shoulders or encircling his head.

As in the Aramaic Ashokan inscriptions, Khotanese and Sogdian Buddhist writers avoided the term *deva*. In Khotan the Indian goddess of prosperity was replaced by her Iranian equivalent Shandramata (the Zoroastrian Spenta Armaiti). Mithra appears in Sogdian Buddhist texts and as a statue accompanying the smaller of the two colossal Buddhas which existed at Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Zurvan, the Iranian god of time, replaces Brahmana in a Sogdian *jataka* (a story about the Buddha in his prior incarnations), while in some texts the Indian god Indra becomes Ohrmazd. The Buddhists were not entirely accommodating to Zoroastrianism, however. They were deeply critical of a number of Zoroastrian practices, including consanguinal marriage, the habitual killing of "Ahrimanic" animals such as snakes and scorpions, and the exposing of corpses.

The square form of stupa-building was adopted by the Buddhists of eastern Iran from the region's pre-existing tradition of sacred architecture, eventually becoming the norm throughout the Buddhist world. Another Iranian contribution to Buddhist architecture was the carving out of sacred grottos from rock — a technique inherited from Achaemenid funerary architecture — which spread to Buddhist sites throughout India and China. The most famous Iranian examples were the two colossal rock-cut buddha statues of Bamiyan, one measuring one hundred feet in height and the other one hundred and fifty, which dated to the sixth century CE. The taller one, which was apparently painted red, is referred to in medieval Muslim sources as "the Red Buddha," and the shorter one as "the White Buddha," presumably painted white. The two colossi survived until recent times when they were tragically destroyed by Afghanistan's Taliban regime in 2001. (The Taliban period also saw the destruction of many other Buddhist sites, as well as the pillaging of Buddhist artifacts from Afghan museums.)

Iranian influences are also present in the Buddhist art of the so-called Gandhara School, which arose under the Kushans in the first and second centuries CE. Representations of the Buddha in statues and paintings appear from this time onwards and are generally considered to emerge from Western forms, especially Greek but to some extent Iranian as well.

One distinctive feature in Gandhara art is the new prevalence of *bodhisattva* figures. The bodhisattva ideal is associated with the emergence of Mahayana ("Great Vehicle") Buddhism, a movement which arose in northwestern India and began to challenge the established schools (*nikayas*, called Hinayana or "Lesser Vehicle" by the Mahayanists) some time shortly before the Common Era. The Mahayanists are characterized mainly by

their identification with certain texts, many of which were apparently composed in the multicultural Indian-Iranian border region.¹²

Finding Iranian figures and notions in the Mahayana system therefore comes as little surprise. Probably the most obvious is the bodhisattva Maitreya, the future Buddha who will come as a saviour figure at the end of time — a clear parallel to the Zoroastrian Saoshyant, and entirely absent from the “do-it-yourself” salvation of the earliest Buddhist texts. Maitreya is the most common bodhisattva figure occurring in Gandharan art, demonstrating his immense popularity in the Indo-Iranian border regions.

Another bodhisattva, Amitabha (which means “infinite radiance”), the Buddha of Light, bears many features associated with the Iranian god of time, Zurvan.¹³ A third, Avalokiteshvara, shares certain elements in common with Mithra, originally the Iranian god of covenants, identified with the sun. In Khotanese Buddhist mythology we find the figure of Kshitigarbha, non-existent elsewhere in the Buddhist world, who conducts souls across a “bridge of death” which sounds strikingly like the Zoroastrian Chinvat.

Just as some elements of Buddhist iconography appear in western Iran, numerous Sasanian features are found in the Buddhist art of the Iranian East. One such image is that of the griffin; another is that of a duck holding a necklace. In a seventh-century statue at Bamiyan, Maitreya is depicted wearing a crown identical to that of the Sasanian ruler Khosrow II. Many Bamiyan buddhas also wear hair ribbons of the Sasanian style.

Beginning in the Kushan period Central Asian Buddhists began to build stupas to house relics of the Buddha. The architecture of many of these shrines, which allowed for circumambulation by pilgrims, seems to have been borrowed from that of Zoroastrian fire temples. The practice of adorning the shrines with flower garlands, prevalent in Bactria, was apparently carried over from a ritual associated with the Iranian goddess Anahita.

The merchants and missionaries who carried Buddhism to Central Asia and China were mostly of Iranian background. Many were Parthians, while others were Sogdians from what is now Uzbekistan, or Sakas from Khotan in what is now western China. Merchants and other travelers tended to be multilingual, and as such they often applied their skills to translating texts. Many translations of Buddhist works from Indian languages into Chinese were done by translators with Iranian names.

From the T'ang period onwards one of the most popular forms of Buddhism in China was the so-called “Pure Land” school, which taught that in order to be saved one merely had to be pronouncing the Buddha's name at the moment of death. Amitabha, the Buddha of Light, would then transport the devotee to a Pure Land of bliss, called Sukhavati, located somewhere in the West. As noted above, this markedly soteriological faith is at odds with the “do-it-yourself” approach of early *nikaya* Buddhism in India, and seems to owe far more to Iranian tradition.

In another example, an annual ritual widely practiced in T'ang China, in which the “hungry ghosts” of departed ancestors are fed, resembles the Iranian “all souls” festival of Fravardigan, from which it may be derived. This is the contention of Iwamoto Yutaka, who proposes that the Chinese name for the festival comes (via Sogdian) from the

Iranian word for “soul” (*ravān*) and suggests that the salvation story associated with it — in which the virtuous monk Mu-lien willingly descends into Hell to save his sinful mother — is a form of the Greek myth of Dionysos and Semele which was transmitted by Iranians to China.¹⁴

The Disappearance (Submersion?) of Iranian Buddhism

Buddhism’s spread to the West during Sasanian times was impeded by the state-supported power of the Zoroastrian magi. Iranian Buddhism was strongest in the East, in what is now northern and eastern Afghanistan, far from the center of Sasanian control. In the seventh century these territories were conquered by the Muslim Arabs, whose interest in controlling trade routes put them in direct economic competition with Buddhist merchants and monasteries.

Hostile references in the Qur’an to the “idol-worshipping” Meccan Arabs of Muhammad’s time were easily transformed into ideological weapons against the Buddhists, who, unlike Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, were not offered the protection accorded under Islamic law to “peoples of the Book.” At first during the Umayyad period (661–750), the Arabs were content with submission to their overlordship and converts mostly sought to join the Islamic community of their own accord. Over time, however, as the Muslims consolidated their power in eastern Iran, anti-Buddhist attitudes became more prevalent, and while small Buddhist communities in some remote areas may have survived as late as the twelfth century, by the ninth century it would seem that most Iranian Buddhists had abandoned their religion in favour of Islam.

Yet, as is most often the case with religious conversions, Iranian Buddhists who joined the Islamic community brought a number of influences with them. The Barmak family (their name likely derived from the Sanskrit *pramukha*, “chief”; they are known in European literature as the Barmecides) who held the reins of power as ministers in the Islamic caliphate during the first half of the ninth century, had originally been in charge of a major Buddhist shrine in the city of Balkh and may have remained unofficial patrons of Buddhist communities even after their supposed conversion to Islam. Richard Bulliet has suggested that their inherited position both provided the Barmaks with a regional power base of former Buddhists and enabled the central government in Baghdad to exercise control over eastern Iran through the Barmaks’ influence.¹⁵

Among the Sufis, the well-known early saint Ibrahim ibn Adham (d. ca. 790), also from Balkh, came from a Buddhist background as well. The story of his spiritual journey in some respects almost exactly mirrors that of the Buddha’s, clearly an attempt to reach a Buddhist audience. One of the first of the so-called “intoxicated” (i.e., ecstatic) Sufis, Abu Yazid (Bayazid) of Bistam (d. 874), was originally a disciple of an Indian teacher from Sindh, still a heavily Buddhist area at that time. Certain Buddhist ideas are detectable in the mystical philosophy of these and other eastern Iranian Sufis. The notion of *fana’*, for example — interpreted in Islamic terms as “annihilation in God” as the

ultimate goal of the mystic — bears a strong resemblance to the Buddhist concept of nirvana.

In another possible example of Buddhist influence, certain heterodox “Islamic” sects such as the nominally Twelver Shi‘ite Ahl-e Haqq in western Iran, like earlier Iranian movements such as Manichaeism, Mazdakism, and the Abu Muslimiyya, retain a belief in reincarnation.

The Mongol Revival

Buddhism experienced a brief revival in Iran during the second half of the thirteenth century under the Mongol dynasty known as the Il-khans. The founder of this dynasty, Hülegü Khan (r. 1256–1284) and his successor Arghun Khan (r. 1284–1291) were at least nominal Buddhists, and for four decades Buddhism held the status of something like state religion in Iran. The first two Il-Khanids favored foreign Buddhist merchants over local Muslim ones, and allowed for the building of Buddhist institutions and the transfer of assets (a nice way of saying “looting”) from Muslims to Buddhists.

Needless to say these practices aroused the resentment and hostility of Iran’s Muslim majority. After the conversion of the Mongol ruler Ghazan Khan to Islam around the turn of the fourteenth century Buddhist activity in Iran was quickly extinguished, and the newly-built Buddhist monasteries and stupas were either destroyed or converted into mosques. Buddhism essentially disappeared from Iran, reappearing only in the twentieth century in the context of some modern poetry and an emerging popular new age movement.

Buddhism and ‘*erfān*’¹⁶

There are subtle similarities with Buddhist ideas in the distinctly Iranian form of Islamic mysticism known as ‘*erfān*. Indeed, the first flowering of ‘*erfān*, seen especially in Sufi poetry and in the contemplative idealism of Persian miniature painting, occurred in the period following the Mongol devastations of Iranian territory in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, perhaps reflecting a need among Iranians to find inner peace amidst external turmoil.

A similar set of conditions may have been at work in the twentieth century, when Iranians were first confronted with a despotic monarchy many found spiritually lacking, then by a professedly religious regime many saw (and see) as spiritually bankrupt. During the period of the last monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979), several of Iran’s best-known poets, including most notably Sohrab Sepehri (1928–1980), drew overtly on Buddhist inspiration in their work, likely seeking a more peaceful alternative to the spirituality offered by militant Shi‘ism.

Sepehri’s poem “Bodhi” is a good example:

It was a moment; the doors opened
Not a leaf, not a branch, the garden of nirvana (*fanā*) appeared
The birds of the place are silent

This is silent, that is silent, it seems all has been silenced
What was this scene? Beside a lamb, a wolf stood
A weak voice, a weak echo
Has the curtain been pulled aside?
I've left, it has left, no more us
Beauty has been left alone
Every river has become the sea
Every being has become a buddha¹⁷

Another well-known contemporary poet, and Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000), had some interest in Japanese Buddhism. He dedicated one of his poems to the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828), and translated a book of haiku poetry into Persian. His collaborator on the haiku volume was Askari Pasha'i (who also wrote three books on Shamlou), one of Iran's most accomplished translators who has a longstanding interest in Buddhism. Pasha'i has lived in Japan and has published Persian editions of a number of books on Buddhism.

In the post-revolution period Buddhist ideas and practice, often as part of a broader new-age type spirituality, have exerted an increasingly visible and explicit influence within Iranian society. Scholarly and popular books on Buddhism, both translations of works by westerners and original studies in Persian, are bestsellers in Iran today. Meditation centres do a thriving business, and seminars draw large audiences.

While some Iranians today, such as Oscar-nominated actress Shohreh Aghdashloo, go so far as to overtly self-identify as Buddhists, more often they merely incorporate aspects of Buddhist philosophy into their existing Muslim identity, practicing meditation for example; like the Catholic monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968), they appear to see no fundamental exclusiveness between Buddhism and their own inherited religious tradition.

Even within some traditional circles of Shi'i scholarship, intellectual interest in other religions which formerly focused only on Islam's "Abrahamic" relatives Judaism and Christianity, now extends to Buddhism. This is particularly evident in the city of Qom, Iran's major centre of Shi'ite learning, where a recently established "University of Religions" (*Dāneshgāh-e adyān*) provides perhaps the only official academic setting in Iran where the comparative study of religion is actively pursued in a relatively non-polemical manner.

On the other hand, in the present tense political climate Buddhism sometimes finds itself dragged into the ongoing tug-of-war between various ideological factions vying for power. The current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, for example, has threatened on several occasions to "look into" the activities of meditation centres to verify their Islamic acceptability, and publishers of books on "alternative spirituality" are finding it difficult to get clearance from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance or to have their publications included at book fairs.

Thus, there would seem to be a certain historical continuity in the ways that Iranian Muslims relate to Buddhism. One might say that in Iranian culture, beneath an outward

profession of officially-sanctioned religion, the underlying norm is that of a deep, personal, often mystical spirituality that at the individual level feels free to draw on an almost unlimited range of tools and influences. On this deeper level, Buddhism has played a subtle, albeit often obscured role for many centuries, and may well continue to do so in the future.

Endnotes

1. This is a revised and expanded version of what originally appeared as chapter four of *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2004), 61–75. A Persian version, translated and with additional notes by A. Pasha'i, appeared as "Āyīn-e būdā dar Īrān" in the journal *Haft Āsemān* 9/36 (2008): 86–98.
2. See Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization*, revised 2nd edition (New York: Palgrave, 2010).
3. Mariko Namba Walter, "Buddhism in Western Central Asia," paper presented at the 111th American Historical Association annual conference, Seattle 1998.
4. "Statues in Iran Challenge Theories on Buddhism's Spread," *The Japan Times*, (14 May 2002).
5. Warwick Ball, "How Far Did Buddhism Spread West?," *Al-Rāfidān* 10 (1989): 1–10.
6. The existence of a Persian meaning for this term, "new spring," is most likely coincidental.
7. Samuel Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, (New Delhi: Oriental Reprints, 1969 [1888]), 44–45.
8. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
9. Mas'udi, *Murūj al-dhabāb*, edited and translated by Barbier de Meynard (Paris, 1965), iv, 79; cited in A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "L'évocation littéraire du bouddhisme dans l'Iran musulman," *Le monde iranien et l'Islam* 2 (1974), 20.
10. Melikian-Chirvani, "L'évocation littéraire du bouddhisme," 37.
11. *Ibid.*, 57.
12. See Gregory Schopen, "Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17/3–4 (1975): 147–181.
13. Ronald E. Emmerick, "Buddhism Among Iranian Peoples," in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *Cambridge History of Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), iii, 955–956.
14. Iwamoto Yutaka, *Jigoku meguri no bungaku* (Tokyo: Kaimei shoten, 1979), 184–99; cited in Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 24.
15. Richard Bulliet, "Naw Bahar and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism," *Iran* 14 (1976), 140–145.
16. This section is largely inspired by discussions with my wife, Manya Saadi-nejad, and my Persian translator, Askari Pasha'i.
17. Sohrab Sepehri, in *Sharq-e andūb* (Tehran: Ketābkhāneye Tahūrī, 1358 [1979]), 239–240.

The Muslim Doctrine of Prophethood in the Context of Buddhist-Muslim Relations in Japan: Is the Buddha a Prophet?¹

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Introduction

From early on in their history, Muslims have employed the concept of prophethood in relating to non-Muslim peoples and their traditions by recognizing their spiritual leaders as prophets. This is mostly demonstrated regarding the Abrahamic traditions, such as Christianity, where Jesus is viewed as a prophet. Despite the lack of clear reference to Buddhists in the *Qur'ān*, a number of prominent classical scholars and contemporary writers have attempted to interpret Buddhism in a similar doctrinal framework. For example, Ibn al-Nadīm (d.995) regards the Buddha as a prophet, viewing him as one of Allah's apostles to the Indians.² Al-Shahrastānī (1086–1153) compares the Buddha to al-Khidr, who could also be considered a prophet.³ In the contemporary world, the view of the historical Buddha as a Muslim prophet is found particularly widely among Muslims from South and Southeast Asia, where Buddhist-Muslim relations have been in progress for a long time. For such Muslims, who benefit from good relations with Buddhists, the doctrine of prophethood provides a useful means of interrelating.

In the globalized world of today, encounters with Buddhists are not limited to those in certain parts of Asia. Muslim emigrants to non-Muslim countries and converts to Islam there, in particular, have already been dealing with the dominant religious and cultural traditions of their locality. Japan, a generally Buddhist country with a small growing Muslim community, is no exception.⁴ Despite the relatively short history of direct Japanese-Muslim involvement,⁵ some Muslims, both Japanese and non-Japanese, have attempted to relate to local traditions, exploring the possibility of a Japanese prophet.

The present article examines the views of leading figures from Japan's Muslim communities regarding the historical Buddha. Such figures may exert substantial influence upon future Buddhist-Muslim relations through their involvement in interreligious dialogues and hermeneutical activities. The article pays particular attention to the

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views of Japanese Muslims, mainly discussing the following two points: 1) that Japanese Muslims are more cautious about recognizing Śākyamuni as a prophet than non-Japanese Muslims, both in and outside Japan. This may be because they, as converts, are highly careful not to be too “creative” with their interpretations of the Islamic teachings; and 2) that they simultaneously desire to see more connections established between Islam and Buddhism, which may contribute to future recognition of the Buddha as a prophet. The article first examines the scriptural basis for the Buddha’s potential prophethood, exploring how it is employed by various types of contemporary Muslims outside Japan. Then it outlines the situations of Muslims in Japan, discussing some Japanese Muslim attempts to find a Japanese prophet. Finally, it examines how Muslims in Japan apply the doctrine of prophethood to the historical Buddha, exploring why the approach by Japanese Muslims is different from that of non-Japanese.

Prophethood in Islam: its Definition and Applicability to Buddhism

The doctrine of prophethood is the main framework for Muslim recognition of other religions. It is closely related to the idea of *dīn al-ḥaqq*, the original religion, which accounts for non-Muslim traditions. What follows examines some basic implications that the Islamic doctrine of prophethood has for the notion of the historical Buddha as a prophet.

Prophets in Islam

Prophets are human individuals who receive revelation from God and have a mission to propagate it among their peoples. Although extremely virtuous and morally impeccable, they are mortals and not divine.⁶ With such special intellectual faculty and imagination, they present the Truth incomprehensible to the ordinary populace in symbols and metaphors that are intelligible to them.⁷ According to the *Qur’ān* (e.g. 10:47, 16:36, 35:24), every nation has a prophet (or messenger) sent to them by God; all sent between the times of Adam and Muḥammad, the first and the last of the succession of prophethood respectively. All prophets serve their own peoples, such as Jesus for the Israelites, excepting Muḥammad, as the last and final prophet, whose mission was universal. While twenty-five prophets are named in the *Qur’ān*, many others are left unspecified.⁸ The exact number of these unnamed prophets is not established, ranging between a few thousand to as many as 124,000,⁹ and including non-Israelite prophets.

This suggests that there is good reason within Islamic parameters to consider Siddhārtha Gautama (c.563–c.483 BCE), the historical Buddha, as a prophet. He lived before the coming of Muḥammad (and after Adam), and his sphere of activity is not covered by that of biblical prophets. It may, therefore, at least be possible to consider him one of the unnamed non-Israelite prophets, sent to what is now Nepal and/or India. Some scholars, mostly those with a South Asian background, have even suggested that the Buddha is indeed named in the *Qur’ān* (21:85 and 38:48) as Dhu-l Kifl, “the man

from Kapilavastu,”¹⁰ or that the fig tree mentioned in the *Qur’ān* (95:1) refers to the bodhi tree under which he attained enlightenment.¹¹ While these theories of potential Qur’ānic reference to the historical Buddha do not seem to be widely accepted, they reflect well the Muslim willingness to recognize other religions through “extending” prophethood to their leaders.

Dīn al-Fitrah: the Framework for Recognizing All Religions

In terms of the actual content of the prophets’ revelations, these mainly consist of monotheistic doctrines.¹² The chief task of prophets is to remind man of *tawḥīd*, the oneness of God; to rectify the ways of their people and guide them to the right path. This task, shared by all prophets, is closely rooted in the Islamic concept of *dīn al-fitrah*, the natural or original religion, thus providing a basis for Muslim recognition of non-Islamic traditions. “*Fitrah*,” as mentioned in the *Qur’ān* (30:30), is a natural inclination inherent in all individuals to embrace the *tawḥīd*.¹³ While all humans are born with *fitrah*, and hence as Muslims, they can become alienated from it, taking up wrong beliefs and practices in the course of their lives. Therefore, *dīn al-fitrah*, the religion of *tawḥīd*, is also regarded as the source and basis of different religious traditions, exemplified in its most complete form in Islam. It precisely *is* Islam,¹⁴ all other religions being mere offshoots which have retained only part of that essence (i.e., *tawḥīd*), or corrupted over the course of time.¹⁵ In other words, the messages of different prophets became different religious traditions that have, in varying degrees, parts of the Truth. These prophets teach, or “allegorize,” the Truth in ways that are most suitable to their local cultures, so that some teachings are closer to the Truth than others.¹⁶ This suggests that, while all prophets convey the message of *tawḥīd*, their teachings have different levels of validity dependent on how they interpreted them for their peoples. The fact that some prophetic messages have less “merit” than others may not be because the prophets in question were less capable, but because a full-fledged message of *tawḥīd* was less ideal for the peoples receiving that particular teaching.

The general implication that this doctrinal framework has for Islamic understanding of Buddhism, therefore, is twofold. Firstly, on an Islamic worldview, Buddhism, or the teaching of the Buddha, reflects some portion of the teaching of *tawḥīd* and it was Buddha’s mission to correct the religious inclinations of his time.¹⁷ Secondly, the Buddhist tradition subsequently became altered or corrupted, with its followers alienating from their “*fitrah*,” which would anticipate the coming of Prophet Muḥammad.

Applicability of the Framework: Non-Japanese Examples

While views that the historical Buddha is mentioned in the *Qur’ān* have been put forward mainly by South Asian scholars, the doctrinal framework based on the concept of *dīn al-fitrah* is employed far more widely among Muslims of different theological convictions. Though their overall evaluations of Buddhism may be radically different, it is fairly clear that they follow the same line of thought concerning prophethood.

Speaking from a Sufi perspective, for example, Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927), an Indian Sufi teacher and founder of a Sufi order in the West, argues that all religions have the same essence, and that the purpose of Sufism is to “bring together” all religions,¹⁸ rather than to bring all religions to Islam.¹⁹ He further observes that their leaders have taught (different aspects of) the same message from God in different ways in different times to suit their audience “when the necessity arises.”²⁰ Regarding worship of the Buddha as a later development, inconsistent with what the Buddha taught, Khan observes that Buddhism teaches “that the innermost being of every soul is divine,” realization of which is the same as “the secret of Sufism.”²¹

Scholars of the Lahore Ahmadiyya movement²² are keen to show that the Buddha actually taught *tauhīd*.²³ Mirza Tahir Ahmad (1928–2006), the fourth successor of the movement,²⁴ argues that a re-examination of early Buddhist sources shows that “Buddhism began like any other [d]ivinely revealed faith with its emphasis on the Unity of God.” According to him, “the Buddha was a believer in One Supreme Creator. What he rejected was polytheism.” Yet Buddhism, like Hinduism, has “moved away from their Divine origin over thousands years of decadence,” as is evidenced in their development of ascetic practices, which Mirza Tahir Ahmad denoted escapist in their reduction of an individual to absolute self-negation.

Despite probably being the most active critic of Buddhism in the contemporary Muslim world, Harun Yahya (1956–), a Turkish Muslim intellectual committed to refutation of Darwinism and materialism, appears to work within the same doctrinal framework as that of the first two Muslim figures. While harshly criticizing what he sees as an idolatrous tendency and an absence of God in Buddhism,²⁵ this Sunni writer speculates that the historical Buddha may have been a messenger sent to the Hindus, whose true religious teachings later become distorted.²⁶ As the only aspect of Buddhism of which he expresses direct appreciation is ethics,²⁷ it can be said that he recognizes the possibility of the Buddha being a messenger from God, even without finding indications that he taught monotheism.²⁸

Who Recognizes the Buddha as a Prophet and Why? Some Preliminary Remarks

While they resort to the same doctrinal framework, the writers mentioned above provide different rationale for their recognition of the Buddha’s prophethood. This amply suggests that the doctrine of prophethood has a high level of applicability. However, their decision to discuss the prophethood of the Buddha cannot be attributed to the simple question of scriptural authority, as this does not explain why some Muslims elaborate on it while others do not. One possible factor in the willingness of some to consider the possibility is attributable to a sense of affinity with Buddhists and Buddhism. For some it could be a pragmatic measure towards harmonious coexistence, as has long been the case with South and Southeast Asian Muslims. There is also the theological relevance that can arise even for those who are not in regular contact with Buddhists. If a Muslim is impressed or even disturbed by Buddhist beliefs and practices,

they will be encouraged to contemplate how they can interpret and relate to the tradition. This may take the form of missionary activity, as exemplified by Harun Yahya, whose main aim is to show how “wrong” Buddhists beliefs and practices are from an Islamic perspective.

Discussing Prophethood in the Japanese Context

While the doctrine of prophethood can provide a means for various types of Muslims to relate to the Buddhist tradition, employing it in the Japanese context entails a different set of issues. Before discussing how Muslims in Japan apply the doctrine of prophethood to Japanese religiosity, it is necessary to give a brief account of the situations surrounding Muslims in the country.

Muslims in Japan

While over seventy percent of the Japanese claim to be affiliated with Buddhism,²⁹ the current Muslim population in Japan is estimated to be around one hundred thousand; less than one percent of the entire population of the country.³⁰ The vast majority of these Muslims are non-Japanese who came to Japan to work or study and have settled, sometimes illegally as “overstayers.”³¹ In contrast, the Japanese converts still number only something between seven to ten thousand.³² While quite a few Japanese women converted upon marriage to non-Japanese Muslims working in Japan,³³ there also exist those who have embraced Islam out of their personal conviction.³⁴ It is the views of the latter type of converts that the present discussion is mainly concerned with.³⁵

Non-Japanese Muslims in Japan³⁶ do not generally experience any more discrimination than non-Muslim foreigners, unless their religious observances (especially daily prayers) are perceived as hindering the general order of things in the society.³⁷ Employees of big companies seem to have little trouble carrying out their religious observances. However, performing daily prayers during work hours can be problematic in smaller workplaces, such as construction sites and factories, where many Muslims work.³⁸ Japanese within the wider society tend to be more suspicious of converts, regarding them as not conforming to the social norm.³⁹ However, situations vary depending on social circumstances and how practicing these Muslims are.

Looking for a Japanese Prophet: Published Accounts of Japanese Muslims

Japanese Muslim writings are generally more concerned with how Islam can be related to the Japanese culture than with how Buddhism can be interpreted according to Islam.⁴⁰ Those who do not mention the possibility of a Japanese prophet tend to be focused on discussing how different Islam is from the traditions already familiar to the Japanese. Criticising Buddhism for polytheism/idolatry and for lacking “practicality,” they are not usually interested in relating to it.⁴¹

Those who mention the possibility of a Japanese prophet, on the other hand, are more sympathetic to and accommodating about the religious beliefs and practices of Japan. For a Japanese prophet, however, they tend to look to the Shinto tradition, rather

than to Buddhism, although opinions differ on suitable candidates for the role.⁴² For example, Kō Nakata (1960–), a scholar in Islamic studies,⁴³ is critical of the commonly-held view that Japanese Buddhism and Shinto are polytheistic, expressing particular sympathy towards the followers of Jōdo-Shin Buddhism and their reverence for Amida Buddha.⁴⁴ His willingness to accommodate Japanese traditions is also seen in his view, based on Ash‘ari theology, that salvation is to be granted even to those who perform ancestor-worship.⁴⁵

Among the Japanese Muslims who write about religions in Japan, virtually the only one who suggests that the message of *tawhīd* may have reached Japan through Buddhists is Haruo Abe (1920–1999). A member of the legal profession and translator of the *Qur‘ān*, he argues for a “reform” of both Buddhism and Islam,⁴⁶ through which all religions would reach the “*daijō* (Mahāyāna) Islam,” the universal monotheism where Nyorai (Skt: *tathāgata*) is worshipped as the absolute being.⁴⁷ Though critical of the “deviation” into idolatry and pursuit of worldly interest found among some Japanese Buddhists,⁴⁸ Abe sees Japan as having a religious climate suitable for embracing and enhancing the way of universal monotheism.⁴⁹ For example, he recognises various historical figures who submitted themselves to Amida Buddha⁵⁰ as its pioneers.⁵¹ While he refrains from calling them prophets of Islam, since “they had never heard a single passage of the *Qur‘ān*,” this Japanese Muslim regards them as “saints who, by divine providence, paved the way for the coming of Islam to the East.”⁵²

Why not a Buddhist Prophet in Japan?

Following the Qur‘ānic statement that every nation has a prophet, Japanese Muslims explore the possibility of a Japanese prophet, that is, a prophet sent to the Japanese. One of the possible reasons why they look to Shinto is that it is an indigenous tradition, whereas Buddhism was introduced as a foreign religion. The notion of Shinto as Japanese “*islām*” is also supported by the fact that Shinto contains the concepts of a highest deity (Amaterasu ōmikami, the great *kami* Amaterasu) and of a Creator deity (Ameno minakanushi).⁵³

The question of where to look for the prophet sent to Japan may be further complicated by two possible interpretations of the above mentioned doctrinal framework. If every nation has a prophet, the historical Buddha has to be the prophet sent for India (or South Asia). Since a prophet cannot function for two nations (or perhaps cultural areas) simultaneously, the Buddha clearly cannot be the prophet for Japan as well as India. In addition, if every religion, as an offshoot of *dīn al-ḥaqq*, is started by a prophet, then there can be no more “Buddhist” prophets after Śākyamuni, entailing that Japan should expect a non-Buddhist prophet if it were to have one.

It is further possible that Japanese Muslims are discouraged from considering a Buddhist figure as a prophet for Japan because of the absence of unity in Japanese Buddhism and the relatively little emphasis it places on the historical Buddha. There are so many different schools, founded by different individuals, that it is virtually impossible to designate any one as predominant.⁵⁴ The strong focus often placed on their founders

also makes many of the schools in Japanese Buddhism somewhat detached from Śākyamuni Buddha. The above may form in part the rationale for Abe naming many Japanese Buddhists as potential Muslim saints without selecting one as proto-type (i.e. prophet).

Japanese Muslims on Buddhism: Converts' Dilemmas?

Turning now to the context of Buddhist-Muslim relations, the present discussion of how Japanese Muslims approach the doctrine of prophethood focuses on their views of Śākyamuni Buddha, since there seems to be no consensus regarding a principal Japanese Buddhist figure. What follows is based on the results of a survey of Muslim views of Buddhism, which was conducted on both non-Japanese and Japanese Muslims based in Japan from November 2007 to October 2008.⁵⁵

Structure of the Survey

The survey conducted was a highly qualitative one using interviewing and questionnaires, with most of the questions being open-ended. The respondents are representatives of Muslim organisations (including mosques) or those who regularly lead other Muslims in prayers and study groups, except for the one non-Japanese respondent in training at a Zen temple.⁵⁶ Since it targeted respondents knowledgeable about Islam, the survey does not purport to show trends in Muslim views in Japan as a whole. The lists of the respondents and of their views are found below.⁵⁷

Among the variety of questions established for the questionnaire⁵⁸ the present discussion focuses on the one concerning the historical Buddha, although comments for other sections are taken into consideration where necessary. In order to find out how aware respondents were of the above mentioned implications of the doctrine of prophethood, and how interested they were in potentially applying it to the historical Buddha, the question does not directly ask about the possibility. It runs: "Which of the following do you consider as the closest to Śākyamuni Buddha in terms of status and nature? Please tick the appropriate item and explain why." There are seven alternatives given: "Allah, Prophet Muḥammad, 'Ali (the 4th caliph), a prophet, a saint, other (please specify)," and "I don't know." The respondent is expected to choose one (or more) from the given alternatives and explain the choice. While some of the concrete alternatives have been suggested by contemporary writers, this formula mainly intends to clarify what the question is asking and to provide some "ice-breakers" for the respondent.⁵⁹

Responses Overview

There are four views from each group to be considered. The non-Japanese respondents originated from Turkey, India, Malaysia and Azerbaijan. Apart from the Azerbaijani respondent, they did not possess much knowledge about Buddhism. They tended to talk about early or Theravāda Buddhism, usually displaying very little knowledge about Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁶⁰ The Japanese respondents include one from a

Pure Land Buddhist family, two who identified themselves as converted from Buddhism and one as converted from Christianity. One of the converts from Buddhism used to be a keen practitioner and the convert from Christianity had received Buddhist academic training.⁶¹ Unlike the non-Japanese respondents, the Japanese respondents were clearer about the distinctions between the Buddhism practiced in Japan and that found elsewhere. Idolatry, divinisation of the Buddha (or his statue) and the concept of reincarnation, were found to be problematic by non-Japanese and Japanese Muslims alike, while the status of Buddhist monks in Japan was only noted by Japanese respondents. Śākyamuni Buddha was regarded as a prophet or a prophet-like figure by all non-Japanese respondents, while only two Japanese Muslims mentioned that alternative as a possibility without fully endorsing it.

Non-Japanese Responses

Though highly suspicious about certain Buddhist beliefs and practices, Respondent no.1 (1966–), director of a Muslim organization, is confident that basic values are common to peoples of all religious convictions. Although he strongly criticised the Buddhist notion of reincarnation and what he perceives as idolatry in Buddhist practice, this Turkish scholar maintained that Buddhist teachings are similar to those found in Islam. He argued that “90% of the value system and social etiquette of the Japanese is shared with Islam,” although he was unsure “to what extent that [comes from] a Buddhist influence.”

With a perspective very similar to that of *dīn al-ḥaqq*, he suggested that the original message of Buddhism had been distorted somewhere along the way: “Though the Śākyamuni Buddha did not claim that he was a god, he has been idolised, and his disciples have also been deified.” This may suggest that the projected original message of the Buddha itself may have been acceptable from his Muslim point of view. However, he was reluctant to recognize the historical Buddha as a prophet, since he “did not have a revelation,” but was willing to view him as “prophetic in terms of his position.” This implies two things: firstly that he does not regard the Buddha as teaching *tauhīd*, which presumably forms the core of the prophetic message; and secondly, that the one essence shared by all religions in his theory is not monotheism, but moral and ethical teachings. In this regard it is notable that he stated in a dialogue with a Buddhist that he regarded Śākyamuni Buddha, as well as all other Buddhas, as prophets sent by the Only Creator God to propagate the Truth. He viewed Buddhism as idolatrous, yet originally idol-free. His argument that all religions share common origins was based, as in the present analysis, on the idea of common ethical values.⁶² While he may have made the comments regarding prophethood as a friendly gesture towards the Buddhist with whom he was in dialogue, they do amply suggest that he is not at all averse to recognising the Buddha as a prophet.

Respondent no.2 (1956–), the Da’wah director of another Muslim organization with an Indian background, seemed to regard theories that the Buddha is a prophet favorably, mentioning that the Buddha features in the *Qur’ān* as Dhu-l Kifl. Although he appeared

to suspect that Buddhist teaching lacks the concept of *tawḥīd*, he did suggest that the Buddha was one of the 124,000 unnamed prophets found in the *badīth*. Possible reasons for his willingness to support theories about the Buddha's prophethood are that they, as seen above, have been advocated by Indian scholars. He may also be sympathetic towards the Buddha as a fellow Indian. It is however highly intriguing that he regards the Buddha as a prophet while viewing Buddhism as lacking *tawḥīd*. Given that he maintains the Buddha taught people only "good things," it seems that this awareness of the moral and ethical teachings common to both traditions forms the basis for accepting Buddhism as related to Islam via prophethood.

Respondent no.3 (1973–) serves as an imam at a major mosque. His wife (1975–, referred as Respondent no.3f) is a government officer. They also emphasized the common ethical principle between Islam and Buddhism: Although "Muslims don't believe in reincarnation," Islam and Buddhism share "basic [moral and ethical] principles or good deeds being rewarded and bad deeds being punished in the hereafter." They recognised the historical Buddha as a prophet, mentioning the possibility of him being one of the 124,000 prophets. They even suggested that Śākyamuni had revelation; a sign of a genuine prophethood. They said he "was shown the light of truth from a divine source, and from there after (sic.) he spread the words of wisdom to others, which is not very different from the functions of a prophet in Islam." Though they do not specify what kind of "wisdom" he taught, Respondent no.3's remark that "[b]efore, [Buddhism] was a true religion," could suggest that Buddhism has "digressed" from true monotheism and that the Buddha might have taught *tawḥīd*, the true message of *Islam*. Respondent no.3f, on the other hand, observed that "Buddhism is not [a] religion" but "[a] philosophy, or good manners." This implies that what has given her and her husband the impression that Islam and Buddhism share the same origin is their awareness that both traditions have similar moral and ethical teachings, rather than that the Buddha (may have) taught *tawḥīd*. In other words, it is the general appreciation of Buddhism as maintaining ethics which led these respondents to recognise the Buddha as a Muslim prophet and to therefore suspect that he may have originally taught monotheism.

Respondent no.4 (1984–), an Azerbaijani Muslim in training at a Sōtō Zen temple, also expressed certainty that Śākyamuni Buddha was a prophet. She found no conflict in practicing both Islam and Buddhism, even suggesting that Buddhism and Islam work with the same sense of the Ultimate Reality. She was born to a mixed background of Sunni and Shi'i parents and later developed a Sufi inclination as she explored her religious identity.⁶³ Viewing being one with the universe (Jap: *uchū*) in Zen as sharing the same spirit as the Sufi identification with God, she observed that "they use different expressions, but what they feel is the same." This young Muslim lady also claimed that Muḥammad was in the Sufi state, or the state of *satori*, when he received the revelation, just as Śākyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment in the state of Zen (i.e. meditation). Thus connecting the two traditions on an experiential level, she argued that the historical Buddha was one of the prophets sent by God, who were "all human beings" and "propagated right teachings to [their fellow] human beings."⁶⁴ Though she

did not mention revelation or *tawhīd*, it is clear that she regards the ultimate message of Buddhism and Islam as identical, and attained through meditation by Śākyamuni and Muḥammad, respectively.

Prophethood without the Message of Tawhīd?

As seen in the previous section, non-Japanese responses show that the doctrine of prophethood is employed by Muslims from a variety of backgrounds. The willingness of the South and Southeast Asian respondents to accept the prophethood of the Buddha could be understood as in part a tendency nurtured through long history of encounter with Buddhism. Respondent no.4's recognition of the historical Buddha as a prophet, on the other hand, seems to stem from her own spiritual experience (based on her Sufi inclination), rather than her Azerbaijani background.

What is more, the rationale they give for their views seem to suggest, as in the case with Harun Yahya, that teaching monotheism is not an absolutely necessary condition for the historical Buddha to qualify as a prophet. Those who hold that the Buddha is a prophet do not overtly argue that he taught *tawhīd*. They either imply it or completely ignore the matter, thereby naming the Buddha as a prophet without expressly finding *tawhīd* in his teachings.⁶⁵ They are more focused on common ethical values (or, in the case of Respondent no.4, a shared sense of the Ultimate Truth) in arguing that Buddhism is related to Islam via the prophethood of the Buddha.

Japanese Responses

Respondent no.5 (1951–), who regularly leads study sessions on Islam, was raised in a family of Jōdo-Shin practitioners. He paid critical attention to the position of Buddhist monks in Japan, commenting that “Buddhism [in Japan] exists as an occupation to support monks’ lives.”⁶⁶ He argued that “[i]n Buddhism, it is up to monks as part of their occupation [to follow religious precepts],” whereas Muslims “deal with them on the basis of individual responsibility.” While he acknowledges that Allah and Amida Buddha “might be the closest considering that they [both] are the object [for their followers] to completely submit to,” he regards Śākyamuni Buddha, as an “ordinary human being (Jap: *tadano ningen*),” or a “philosopher,” because “he was not chosen by God via revelation.” As in the view of Respondent no.2, the supposed absence of revelation here implies that the respondent does not regard the Buddha’s teaching as containing *tawhīd*.

Respondent no.6 (1960–) is a convert from Christianity with academic training in and personal involvement with both Christianity and Buddhism.⁶⁷ She was also reluctant to compare Śākyamuni with an Islamic figure. She expressed more appreciation for early and Theravāda Buddhism⁶⁸ than for Mahāyāna Buddhism, which she views as digressing “significantly from its starting point” since it “fabricates many Buddhas and worships bodhisattvas other than the [historical] Buddha.” Regarding Theravāda Buddhism, she notes that it “does not believe in an absolute existence called God but that [its practitioners] rely on themselves in endeavoring to pursue the [ultimate] truth,” finding

it “unusual among religions.” Yet, she calls this attitude of striving on a spiritual path “wonderful,” noting that “self-discipline” is valued in both Islam and Buddhism.⁶⁹

However, her appreciation of the teachings of the historical Buddha as expressed in early Buddhism does not lead her to consider positively the possibility that Buddhism may have the same origin as Islam nor that the Buddha may be a Muslim prophet. According to her, Śākyamuni cannot be compared to any Muslim figure because Muḥammad and other Muslim leaders “were faithful to God’s teachings . . . a completely different reason from why Gautama Siddhārtha was respected.” While her concern for doctrinal precision may stem from her academic background, or from the strong sense of commitment to Islam she has as a convert,⁷⁰ this Japanese woman expressed regret about the impossibility of establishing doctrinal connections between the two traditions. This, coupled with her appreciation for basic Buddhist principles, renders an unspoken sense of attachment to the tradition she still holds in high regard.

Turning now to the “converts” from Buddhism, they express clear awareness of the historical Buddha’s potential prophethood, though they do not fully support it due to lack of clear evidence. While he claims to have converted from Buddhism, Respondent no.7 (1966–), one of the very few Japanese imams in Japan and an IT engineer by profession, does not seem to possess much knowledge about the tradition. This suggests that although he was from a Buddhist family, he was not a seriously practicing Buddhist.⁷¹ His main concern about Buddhism was the way it left the question of God unexplained. He finds “the concept of a Creator and the question of who determines the fate in the afterlife (Jap: *raise*, also meaning next life)” in Buddhism to be “very lofty, or ambiguous.” However, it is notable that, as Respondents no.3 and 3f, he commented that he viewed both traditions as expressing the doctrine that what one does in this world is the deciding factors in one’s fate in the next life (or afterlife).

Regarding the position of the historical Buddha, he chooses the alternative “a prophet,” mentioning elements that can support the possibility of the Buddha’s prophethood. Yet, he eventually calls it “impossible to tell [if he is a prophet] as there is no clear concept of Creator in Buddhism.” However, he does note that some Muslims insist that the Buddha is one of the prophets, further observing that the Buddha’s teachings and the *Ḥadīth* display similarity in terms of content and narrative style.⁷² His openness to the possibility of the Buddha’s prophethood could also be seen in his remark that “only Allah knows the truth of the matter.”

Respondent no.8 (1975–), an employee at a Japanese company who often leads study groups for Muslims,⁷³ also takes a positive position regarding the possibility that Śākyamuni Buddha was a prophet. However, the lack of *tauhīd* he finds in the Buddha’s teachings stops him from endorsing the notion of the Buddha as a prophet. Calling himself an “ex-Buddhist,” he says that he used to be particularly attracted to Tantric Buddhism and that, when he was fourteen, he was “determined” to become a Buddhist monk and to attain Enlightenment. At that time, he “thought that [he had] found the Truth in Buddhism since it was the closest religion” to him. Despite the profound

interest he previously had in Buddhism, and a number of similarities he finds between the two religions,⁷⁴ he joined other Japanese respondents in criticising the position of Buddhist monks in Japan. However, he expressed a similar understanding of the Buddhist worldview to that of the non-Japanese Muslims: Buddhism “view[s] the life as a source of all the sufferings.”⁷⁵

When it comes to questions about doctrinal compatibility, however, one can see this keen respondent desiring more substantial bridges than could be found.⁷⁶ He compares the historical Buddha to both prophet and saint, yet is not entirely sure if the choice of the former can be supported in terms of Islamic teachings. He explained his views thus: “It makes me a little sad not to be able to say, “Yes, I believe that he was one of the chosen prophets,” but I cannot say this because I couldn’t find even a trace of the teaching of “Tawheed (sic.)” in the traces of old Buddhism . . . I hope that he was one of the prophets but there is no evidence, thus, he was one of the righteous saints.” For this Japanese convert, granting the title of prophet to Śākyamuni, who did not teach *tawhīd*, would simply be “compromising (sic.) Truth . . . because the Truth is one and clear.”

Attachment to Buddhism v. Commitment to Islam

The last respondent’s comments provide strong indication that previous personal involvement with Buddhism may lead to some sense of attachment to it, giving rise to the desire to see more doctrinal relevance established between the two traditions. The acknowledgement that Respondents no.7 and 8 make about once being Buddhists also does not seem to be unrelated to the serious thought they have given to the possibility of the Buddha’s prophethood. It is further possible that Japanese Muslims generally have some attachment to their cultural background, a significant part of which may be represented by Buddhism, even if they were never particularly committed to it. Respondent’s no.5’s willingness to recognize similarities between Islam and Buddhism, even though he was rather uninterested in exploring the possibility of Śākyamuni’s prophethood, suggests that he has retained sympathy towards his family’s religion.

While these Japanese Muslims may have a certain degree of sympathy for and attachment to Buddhism, they appear to be highly committed believers and attempt to be as doctrinally “upright” as possible. Though the contexts of their conversion may differ, leading to different types of piety and practical commitment to Islam, it is probable that they belong to a group of converts devoted to adherence to Islamic beliefs.⁷⁷ Unlike the non-Japanese respondents, these Japanese Muslims do not recognize the prophethood of the Buddha, even if they do express appreciation of the Buddha’s moral and ethical teachings. For them, the absence of the concept of the only Creator God (or *tawhīd*) in the Buddha’s teaching is the main obstacle to his qualifying as a prophet. As much as they might like to find “proof” of the Buddha’s prophethood, they do not feel that there is strong enough evidence in either Buddhist or Islamic teachings to support the notion.

Conclusion

Unlike the non-Japanese respondents, who based the idea that Buddhism shares the same origins as Islam and that the Buddha may have been a prophet on a sense of shared ethical values, the Japanese Muslim respondents do not accept the Buddha as a prophet since he did not teach monotheism. In exploring the implications that this has for future developments in Japanese Muslim views of Buddhism, three possible reasons for these results can be highlighted.

The first is the relatively lesser importance attached to Śākyamuni Buddha in Japanese Buddhism, compared to the unique status he has elsewhere in Asia, especially in Theravāda countries.

The second is the absence of much involvement (compared with that found in South and Southeast Asia) that Muslims have with Buddhists in Japan. The Japanese Muslim views of the Buddha and Buddhism in general also seem to be influenced by the generally negative perception they have of the Buddhism practiced in Japan. However, the appreciation that some express for basic Buddhist principles suggests that more positive experience with Buddhists in Japan might result in an increased willingness to recognise the Buddha as a prophet.

The third and last factor is that, as converts seriously committed to their chosen faith, they are more cautious about being “creative” with Islamic doctrines than those born into Muslim families. However, as they do appear to wish to make more doctrinal links between the tradition they have converted to and that of their forefathers, to which they may be attached, it is possible that they will one day recognise the Buddha as a prophet. This process may be enhanced by more interfaith dialogue as well as more grassroots involvement, generating greater understanding of Buddhists and appreciation of Buddhism.⁷⁸

List of respondents and views (f means female respondent)

Non-Japanese respondents

	born	nationality and sect/school	occupation and position	view of Śākyamuni Buddha
1	1966	Turkish, Sunni	director of Muslim organisation	prophetic but not a prophet (yet contradicts this in dialogue)
2	1956	Indian, Sunni	Da'wah director of Muslim organisation, university lecturer	a prophet, Dhu-l Kifl
3	1973 / 1975 (f)	Malaysian, Sunni	imam / government officer	a prophet
4	1984	Azerbaijani, mixed, Sufi	medical student, practices Zen	a prophet

Japanese respondents

	born	converted from	occupation and position	view of Śākyamuni Buddha
5	1951	not specified	university lecturer, leads study groups	a philosopher
6	1960 (f)	Christianity	self-employed, based at major mosque	not comparable to a Muslim figure
7	1966	Buddhism	IT engineer, imam	possibly a prophet but impossible to tell
8	1975	Buddhism	company employee, leads study groups	possibly a prophet but more like a saint

All Japanese respondents are Sunni Muslims from generally Buddhist families.

Endnotes

1. The author wishes to thank Prof. Yahya Michot for the opportunity to publish her research and Dr. Afifi al-Akiti for his suggestions on an earlier draft.
2. Ibn al-Nadīm, ed. and trans. Bayard Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 824, 831–2.
3. Bruce, B., Lawrence, *Sabrastānī on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 113–4. The identity of this figure is still debated.
4. Although it is sometimes suggested that Buddhism is not properly practiced in Japan, the present paper regards the country as generally Buddhist on the grounds that it has many Buddhist monks and temples, and that the majority of its population claim to be Buddhist and perform Buddhist rituals.
5. From the end of the nineteenth through to the early twentieth century, the Japanese military authority had much involvement with Muslims, especially those with Pan-Islamist ambitions, which were abandoned at the end of WWII.
6. Some prophets (Ar: *nabī*) are also messengers (Ar: *rasūl*), messengers being of more elevated statues than prophets. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, s.v. “Prophets and Prophethood.”
7. Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 40.
8. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, s.v. “Prophets and Prophethood.”
9. 124,000 is given in the *Musnad* by Ahmad ibn Hanbal. See, for example, Islam Online, “List of the Prophets’ Names,” Fatwa Bank <http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503543348> [accessed on 23/08/2009].
10. While there is no established view of his identity, some hold that he is Prophet Ezekiel. Also see note 23 below.
11. The former theory is considered to have been first propounded by Abu’l Kalam Azad (1888–1958), an Urdu scholar and political figure who fought for India’s independence. The latter theory was proposed by the renowned Indian scholar of Islam, Muhammad Hamidullah (1909–2002). See Zayaul Haque, “A Hindu view of Islam,” *The Milli Gazette* (15 May 2001) <<http://www.milligazette.com/Archives/15052001/sign.htm>> [accessed on 23/08/2009]; Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasulullah: A Concise Survey of the Life and Work of the Founder of Islam* (Hyderabad: Habib & Co., 1974), 27; Imtiaz Yusuf, “Faces of Islam in Southern Thailand,” *East-West Center Washington Working Papers* 7 (March 2007): 1–25, see 7.

12. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “Prophets and Prophethood.”

13. Yasien Mohamed, *Fitra: The Islamic Concept of Human Nature* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1996), 16–17, 85; Isma’il al-Faruqi, “On the Nature of Islamic Da’wah,” *International Review of Mission* 65/260 (October 1976): 391–409, see 395.

14. Given the central position the Islamic tradition has among religions, it may be useful to call this concept “*islām*.”

15. Mohamed, *Fitra*, 14, 22f. For an elaboration on this concept in the context of Muslim views of other religions, see, Isma’il al-Faruqi, “Islam and Other Faiths” in *The Challenge of Islam*, ed. Altaf Gauhar (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1978), 82–111, see. 94–5; Fadhullah Wilmot, “How Does Islam Regard Other Religions?” <<http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=3282>> [accessed on 01/08/2009].

16. Rahman, *Prophecy*, 41–2.

17. It has been suggested by a Muslim scholar that the Buddha was to tackle the polytheistic tendency of Hindus, though he does not regard him as a prophet. Imran Nazar Hosein, *Islam and Buddhism in the Modern World* (Karachi: World Federation of Islamic Missions, 1972), 9.

18. Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Sufi Message*, 14 vols. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 10: 257.

19. While such a notion of universal spirituality may not be accepted by all Muslims, the point here is that the doctrine of prophethood is employed in support of it.

20. Khan, *The Sufi Message*, 9: 150, 164, 233; 10: 253.

21. *Ibid.*, 9: 167.

22. Although their movement is often regarded as heretical, their work is included here because of the importance they attach to the Islamic Scriptures.

23. Abdul Haq Vidyarthi (1888–1977), another Ahmadiyya scholar, argues not only that the Dhu-l-Kifl is the Buddha, but also that Prophet Muhammad is Maitreya Buddha, whose coming was prophesied by the historical Buddha. A. H. Vidyarthi, *Mohammad in World Scriptures, vol. 3: A Comparative Study of the Teachings and Prophecies Foretelling the Advent of the Holy Prophet Mohammed found Extant in Zoroastrian, Hindu, and Buddhist Scriptures* (Lahore, Din Muhammadi Press, 1975), 1005–6, 1049.

24. Mirza Tahir Ahmad, “Buddhism,” in *Revelation, Rationality, Knowledge and Truth* (1998), Part II <http://www.alislam.org/library/books/revelation/part_2_section_2.html> [accessed 14/07/2009].

25. See Harun Yahya, *Islam and Buddhism* (2003) and *Islam and Karma* (2002) <http://www.harunyahya.com/en.m_book_index.php> [accessed 01/08/2009].

26. Yahya, *Islam and Karma*, 10, 160. He also speculates that since Śākyamuni Buddha heralded the coming of a “saviour-messiah,” the Buddha Maitreya, this could be Prophet Muhammad. Yahya, *Islam and Buddhism*, 170.

27. Yahya, *Islam and Buddhism*, 110, 159.

28. While he uses the word “messenger,” it probably means the same thing as “prophet,” for his main intention is to suggest the potential validity of the Buddha’s teachings, rather than to detail their content.

29. Many of them are also affiliated with Shinto, making double religious affiliation a norm. For recent statistics, see Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology, “Shūkyō tōkei chōsa,” <http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/001/index39.htm> [accessed on 30/07/2009].

30. Emile A. Nakhleh, introduction to “Islam in Japan: A Cause for Concern?” *Asia Policy* 5 (2008): 63. Also see Taka-aki Matsumoto, “Nihon no Kōkōsei ga Idaku Isurāmuzō to Sono zesei ni Muketa Torikumi,” Special Issue II: Perception of Islam in Japanese Schools, *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 21/2 (2006): 193–214, see 195; Mimasaka Higuchi, *Nihonjin Musurimu toshite Ikiru* (Tokyo: Kōsei shuppansha, 2007), 195.

31. While many came from Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 80s, the most common origins of recent non-Japanese Muslim residents are Indonesia and Pakistan. Hiroshi Kojima, “Demographic Analysis of Muslims in Japan,” *The 13th KAMES and 5th AFMA International Symposium*, Pusan (2004),

184–9; Keiko Sakurai, *Nihon no Murusimu Shakai* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2003), ch.3; Naoto Higuchi, “Tainichi Musurimu Imin no Kiseki o Meguru Toi” in *Kokkyō o Koeru: Tainichi Musurimu no Shakaigaku* by Naoto Higuchi et al. (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2007), 13f.

32. Ei-in Yasuda, et al., *Eichi: Tero o Koeru Shūkyō no Chikara* (Tokyo: Kōsei Shuppansha, 2005), 60.

33. The number of such women is estimated to be around two thousand. Kyōdō Tsūshinsha Henshū I-inshitsu, “Heiwa no Shūkyō Nanoni: Seiten Kōran no Hitobito,” in *Takokuseki Jipangu no Shuyakutachi: Shin Kaikokukō*, ed. Kyōdō Tsūshinsha (Tokyo: Akashi shoten, 2003), 156.

34. For a list of major Japanese converts to Islam, see for example Hiroshi Suzuki, *Isurāmukyōto no I-ibun* (Tokyo: Mekon, 2002), 239f.

35. While space does not allow a discussion of different types of converts, it can be assumed from their roles in the Muslim community and willingness to share their views for academic purposes, that the Japanese Muslims discussed in the present paper all actively embrace Islamic teachings, and consciously represent the tradition in the country. As adequate research has not yet been conducted regarding Japanese (Buddhist) converts to Islam, reference will be made to literature on conversion of North American and Europeans in general, and to Islam, in analyzing the data.

36. Many of the mosques in Japan have a mixed congregation, but they also function as meeting points for non-Japanese Muslims of the same cultural and linguistic background. For a list of Muslim organizations and mosques in Japan, see “Isrāmu no Hōmu Pēji,” <<http://www2.dokidoki.ne.jp/islam/benri/benriindex.htm>> [accessed on 10/11/2007].

37. The general level of knowledge of Islamic teachings among the Japanese is quite low. While many are aware of basic Muslim practices, they do not appreciate how important religious rules are in Islam, often considering it too strict and legalistic. For Japanese views of Islam, see for example Toru Miura, “Preface” and “Perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Japanese High Schools: Questionnaire Survey and Textbooks,” Special Issue II: Perception of Islam in Japanese Schools, *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 21/2 (2006): 169–91; Matsumoto, “Nihon no Kōkōsei ga Idaku Isurāmuzō.”

38. Sakurai, *Murusimu Shakai*, 197, 220–1; Takuya Tazawa, *Musurimu Nippon* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1998), 212–3; Michael Penn, “Islam in Japan,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 10/1 (2006) <<http://www.asiaquarterly.com/content/view/168/1/>> [accessed on 06/04/2009]; Michael Penn, “Public Faces and Private Spaces: Islam in the Japanese Context,” *Asia Policy* 5 (2008): 95f.

39. See previous note; Naoko Kawada, *Nihonjin Joseishinto ga Kataru Isurāmu An-nai* (Tokyo: Tsukubanesha, 2004), 179.

40. Though Buddhist-Muslim dialogues in Japan have been gradually increasing after the 9/11 incident, they tend to focus on practices and ethics and rarely address doctrinal issues such as the possibility of the Buddha’s prophethood or of a Japanese prophet.

41. See, e.g. Suzuki, *I-ibun*, 78, 226.

42. For a representative example, see Japan Muslim Association, “Isurāmu Q&A” <<http://muslimkyoukai.jp/qanda.htm#3>> [accessed on 11/11/2007].

43. Kō Nakata, *Isurāmu no Rojikkū* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2001), 74.

44. Nakata, *Rojikkū*, 72f. For another Muslim criticism of the monotheism-polytheism contrast, see Kawada, *Isurāmu An-nai*, 29.

45. Kō Nakata, “Kyūsai no Kyōkai: Isurāmu ni Okeru Ikyōto no Kyūsai” <<http://www1.doshisha.ac.jp/~knakata/newpage39.html>> [accessed on 11/11/2007].

46. Haruo Abe, *Isurāmukyō* (Tokyo: Gendai shokan, 1986), 6, 153.

47. Ibid. Nyorai here seems to refer to Amida Nyorai (Buddha). See note 50 below. Although the Ultimate Divinity is called in such a Buddhist name, Abe ultimately disregards the particularities of various Buddhist traditions, urging them to converge with Islam. The similarities he notes between Buddhism and Islam are just stepping stones to lead Buddhists to Islam. Ryūshin Azuma (1936–), a Sōtō Zen scholar, calls Abe’s agenda “Islamic absolutism.” Ryūshin Azuma, *Nihon-no Bukkyō to Isurāmu* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2002), 203–5, 209.

48. Abe, *Isuramukyō*, 61.
49. *Ibid.*, 152.
50. Amida Buddha, the foremost object of worship in Pure Land Buddhism, has been compared to Allah by Japanese Buddhists, as a saviour and a manifestation of emptiness, the ultimate truth in (Mahāyāna) Buddhism, See for example Rikyū Kono, “Kōran ni Mirareru Arrā to Shinran no Amidabutsu” *Indotetsugaku Bukkyōgaku* 4 (1989): 325–33.
51. Abe, *Isuramukyō*, 152–5.
52. *Ibid.*, 154.
53. *Ame-no-minaka-nusbi-no-kami* is one of the three heavenly *musubi* deities mentioned in the *Kojiki*. *Musubi* is the spirit of birth, becoming, accomplishment, combination, harmonisation and growth. *A Popular Dictionary of Shinto*, ed. Brian Bocking (Richmond: Curzon, 1996), s.v. “*ame-no-minaka-nusbi-no-kami*” and “*musubi-no-kami*.”
54. For the rare view of Prince Shōtoku (574–622), who is sometimes called the founder of Japanese Buddhism, as a prophet for Japan, see Safa Sawada, *Nihon-hatsu: Isurāmu ga Sekai o Sukū* (Tokyo: CHC, 2004), 92f.
55. It was conducted as part of the author’s D.Phil project at the University of Oxford.
56. Although she does not play a leading role among Muslims in Japan, and has closer affiliation with Buddhism, it is expected that, given her direct involvement with Buddhism, her view is extremely valuable in exploring how Muslims can relate to it.
57. The survey was conducted in English and Japanese. Responses in Japanese have been translated into English by the author. While only a few of the respondents wished to remain anonymous, they are unnamed for the purpose of simplicity here.
58. The questions ask for the respondent’s personal data, and about their knowledge of Buddhism, contact with Buddhists, general perceptions of Buddhism, reactions to major criticisms posed by some Buddhists, and their views on the doctrinal compatibility between Islam and Buddhism, opinions regarding future Buddhist-Muslim relations and further comments.
59. Although it is prohibited in Islam to associate Allah with anything, the term is included among the alternatives as similarities have been pointed out between Him and the ultimate truth in Buddhism. See note 50 above.
60. They are also ignorant of Buddhas other than Śākyamuni.
61. All Japanese respondents are from a family affiliated with Buddhism, though not all their family members are practicing Buddhists.
62. Selim Jucel Gulec and Toshihide Adachi, “Isrāmu tonō Taiwa,” 2, *Chion* (November 2006): 6–17, see 10–14, 17.
63. Now a medical student, her academic interest is how mental/psychological problems can be treated with medicine based on Zen or Sufi practice.
64. She says that Muslims generally do not accept such views, Indians being one exception.
65. It is sometimes not clear whether the respondent is discussing what the Buddha taught or what they view Buddhists currently holding and practicing. Given that the respondents in this category seem to be largely concerned with early and Theravāda Buddhism, the present analysis treats what they regard to be Buddhist teaching as the same as what they think the Buddha taught.
66. For example, he mentions monks charging lay followers for a posthumous Buddhist name (Jap: *kaimyō*).
67. Apart from early Buddhism, which she studied at university, she is familiar with Shingon Buddhism, which her mother practices, and Zen.
68. The original term is Hīnayāna (Jap: *sbōjō*).
69. She is highly appreciative of major Buddhist ideas such as “the Three Marks of Existence, the Four Noble Truth and the Noble Eightfold Path.”
70. It is clear from her claim that it does not make sense for a monotheistic religion to tolerate others, since this would lead to “inconsistency in its doctrine,” that she regards it as of foremost importance to be faithful to Islamic teachings.

71. Perhaps he did not have much exposure to Buddhist practices, since he spent much of his childhood in Europe. See Tazawa, *Musurimu Nippon*, 207f; Kyōdō Tsūshinsha, “Heiwa no Shūkyō Nanoni,” 152–6.

72. He mentions a *ḥadīth* about brushing teeth with a toothbrush made out of a twig.

73. Respondent no.8 was suggested by Respondent no.3 (snowball method).

74. The list includes the mercy of the Buddha and Allah and their role in salvation.

75. He is also suspicious of the concept of reincarnation. Though he does not specify why he did not remain Buddhist, these elements may have led to his rejection of Buddhism.

76. While observing that Amida Buddha is unlike Allah in that he is not known to be the perfect being or the Creator of the Universe, like Respondent 5 he recognises that Amida Buddha is similar to Allah in that his followers face “him alone and no one other.”

77. See Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 132; Rebecca Sachs Norris, “Converting to What?: Embodied Culture and the Adoption of New Beliefs,” in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, eds. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 174. Although research has yet to be done on how committed such active converts are to Islam compared to born Muslims, the author’s impression is concurrent with Köse’s view that the former tend to take its teachings more seriously than the latter. That some European converts perceive born Muslims as not practicing Islam properly is noted in Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European Context: the Experience of Scandinavian Converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 263–72.

78. If their current observation of how Buddhism is practiced generally in Japan were to stand, then this possibility would require placing attention on those whom they feel are practicing the tradition seriously.

The Notion of Buddha-Nature: An Approach to Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue

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Buddhist-Muslim dialogue is a field that is still relatively uncharted, compared to Muslim-Christian or Muslim-Jewish relations, which are given much deserved attention both in the media and in academia, for obvious reasons. With a few exceptions, scant attention has been given to issues in Muslim-Buddhist relations and their implications for a shared global future.

The idea for this article was born as a result of a Buddhist-Muslim dialogue entitled “Towards a Global Family” that was held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on Sep. 3–4, 2008, in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This dialogue was the tenth in a series sponsored by the Global Family for Love and Peace, a non-governmental organization dedicated to building a harmonious world through educational and social service programs and sponsoring interfaith dialogues. The dialogue series was initiated in 2001 by Dharma Master Hsin Tao, the abbot of the Ling-jiou Mountain monastic community in Taiwan and Museum of World Religions in Taipei, in response to the destruction of the Buddhist statues in Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001. Based on the mission of the Museum of World Religions to foster mutual understanding, respect and friendship through interfaith education and dialogue, this series aims at opening up new perspectives on how Islam and Buddhism can together address the challenges created by the political, religious, economic and cultural crisis facing the world in the 21st century.¹

More than three-fifths of the world’s Muslims live in Asia, where the majority of Buddhists live as well. Since the members of these two religious communities combined comprise the vast majority of Asia’s population, creating partnerships through interfaith dialogue in order to face these challenges on a peaceful basis of mutual cooperation and friendship is an all-important task.

The dialogue series started at Columbia University in 2002, followed by dialogues in Malaysia, Indonesia, at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in 2003, in Iran and Spain in 2004, in Morocco in 2005, China in 2006 and Taiwan in 2008. During the dialogue on “Future Directions in Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue” held at the Museum of World Religions in Taiwan, the question was raised as to whether the Buddhist concept of

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Buddha-Nature could serve as a basis for deepened understanding between the two religions. It is this question that I seek to address in what follows below.

The Notion of Buddha-Nature

a) Origin of the notion in the *Lotus Sutra*

The notion of Buddha-Nature as such was not known in Theravāda Buddhism, but arose within Mahāyāna Buddhism. It entered the foundations of the major Chinese Buddhist schools and became pivotal for all of East Asian Buddhism. It can be traced back to the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, a Mahāyāna scripture composed at the beginning of the common era, which was translated into Chinese in several versions between the 3rd and 7th century C.E. The *Lotus Sutra* introduced the notion that there is within us an innate seed of awakening that, through religious practice, can develop into full enlightenment. In other words, there is a potential within us to become fully enlightened, to become a Buddha. The image used in the text for this potential is that of “children of the Buddha.” The text says: “When children of the Buddha have taken this path, in a future life they will become Buddhas.”² In commentaries to the *Lotus Sutra* and later scriptures, this potential is called *tathāgata-gārbha*. *Tathāgata* means “thus gone” and “thus come.” It is an epithet for the Buddha who is “thus-gone” in realizing enlightenment and “thus-come” in returning to the world to work for the salvation of all beings. *Gārbha* is variously translated as the “germ” or “embryo,” “womb” or “matrix” of the *Tathāgata*. The term thus has a double meaning: it designates both the content — the embryo of the Buddha- as well as the womb that contains it. Since the Chinese literal translation of this term — “Treasure of the *Tathāgata* (*rulaizang*)” was too cumbersome, it was eventually rendered into Chinese as “Buddha-Nature” for short. There is no Sanskrit equivalent for this term.

But what, one may ask, is the meaning of Buddha in this context? Clearly, it cannot exclusively refer to prince Siddhārtha Gautama of the Śākya clan, who lived in the 5th or 6th century BCE, who left his palace, wife and child behind at age 29 on a religious quest and who, after six years of earnest religious practice, reached awakening under the Bodhi tree and thus came to be called the Buddha — meaning “one who is awake.” As is known, Buddha Śākyamuni spent the next 45 years of his life as a wandering sage, devoted to helping and teaching all those who came to him with their questions and issues in their own life, guiding them towards the experience of enlightenment, so that they could arrive at inner peace and treat all beings with compassion.

After the death of the Buddha at age eighty, different views developed among the early Buddhist schools about how the human existence of the Buddha should be understood. In early sources, the Buddha was addressed with such epithets as “World Honoured One,” “perfectly enlightened One,” “most exalted among gods and human beings,” or “teacher of human beings and gods,” just to give a few. These appellations show that the Buddha was regarded more than “just human.” He was held to be even superior to the divinities of the Hindu tradition, as a being worthy of respectful

eneration. Among the thirty-two bodily marks of the Buddha ascribed to him by the tradition, there is a sign of a wheel with thousand spokes on the soles of his feet. In this context, the Pāli canon relays the story of a Brahman who asked the Buddha about this mark, exclaiming “these certainly cannot be the footprints of a human being!”³ In response, the Buddha explains that he has left all forms of existence in the cycle of life and death (*samsāra*) behind, and that he can neither be properly understood as a human being, a god or celestial being. He is a “Buddha,” one who has overcome the world.

In the dispute about the understanding of the human existence of the Buddha, the Theravāda school maintained that the historical Buddha was a real human being, who attained enlightenment in his very existence on earth. In accordance with Indian notions about karma and rebirth, the Buddha was also believed as having led many previous lives in which he built up the good karma necessary to reach enlightenment through deeds of kindness and self-sacrifice on behalf of others. In contrast to this, the *Lotus Sutra* revealed that Buddha Śākyamuni was continually present, that he had attained enlightenment multitudes of aeons ago and only *appeared* in a human form in order to teach deluded beings and lead them towards liberation. It was his great compassion that motivated the eternal Buddha to go through the motions of being born, entering the religious path, attaining realization, giving different kinds of teachings and finally entering *Nirvāna*. The text further explains that these manifestations of the Buddha’s human life were the skillful means (*upāya*) used by the all-wise and eternal Buddha to bring those who had gone astray back on the right path and open their eyes.

Thus, the *Lotus Sutra* presents the notion of two bodies of the Buddha: a trans-historical Buddha as a being of wisdom and compassion, and the historical Śākyamuni who is his earthly embodiment, rooted in and emanating from this historical Buddha. The text furthermore describes this eternal Buddha as having various other emanations, the Buddhas of the various realms. The text thus presents the basic elements that lead to the formulation of the “Three Bodies of the Buddha” (*trikāya*) doctrine and the elaboration of the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine in later texts.

b) The Three Bodies of the Buddha and the teaching of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*

To get a sense of the full range of meaning implied in the term “Buddha-Nature,” it is necessary to see it in relationship to the doctrine of the Three Bodies of the Buddha (*trikāya*). The *trikāya* doctrine was developed as an answer to the question raised by the disciples after the passing of Buddha Gautama of what makes a Buddha a Buddha, or, in other words, what is the essence of the Buddha. In the earliest strata of the Pāli scriptures, the Buddha was already closely identified with the teaching, the *Dharma*. After the Buddha’s passing into *Nirvāna*, the disciples were advised to hold on to the *Dharma* for refuge instead of him. The *Dharma* is that which has been realized and taught by the Buddha, who, as the text states, “is the one who has the *dharmā* for his body.”⁴ Thus, the term *dharmakāya* (*dharmā*-body) was originally an appellation for the Buddha, identifying him with the body of teachings leading to awakening.

In the *Wisdom Sutras*, that whose body is the *dharmā* became identified with the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), that wisdom which perceives the essential emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all things. The background to this new emphasis was the veneration of the relics of the Buddha enshrined in *stupas*. While in popular piety, the Buddha was believed to be still present on earth in a tangible form through his relics, the *Wisdom Sutras* pointed out that the essence of the Buddha could not be grasped through his physical body (*rupakāya*), but only through the eternal *dharmakāya*, which is the insight into emptiness. Emptiness means that there is no Self to be found in any of the five components (*skandhas*) that make up a sentient being: bodily form, sensation, reaction, volition and consciousness. In short, all sentient beings are empty of Self, and all existence is empty of an unchanging, everlasting essence. The realization of emptiness is reached in deep meditation, and this insight leads to the fruition of the second body, called the enjoyment body (*samboghakāya*). The Buddhas of the various celestial realms are examples of this body. The third body, the apparitional body (*nirmānakāya*), takes on different forms in earthly existence and uses various expedient means to bring sentient beings to liberation. As mentioned above, Buddha Śākyamuni Gautama is an example of this form. This version of the *trikāya* doctrine, which emphasizes the emptiness of an impersonal Dharma-body, is mainly to be found in the teachings of the Yogācāra school.⁵ This school puts the emphasis on meditative practice to attain the goal of enlightenment.

But in contrast to this emphasis, later Mahāyāna *sutras*, and especially those that contain the *tathāgatagārbha* teaching, developed the notion of the *Dharma* body as a personal absolute. One example for this is the *Mahāparinīrvāna Sutra*, which emphasizes the eternity of the Buddha, linking it to the *tathāgatagārbha* and implicitly criticizing the idea that *Nīrvāna* means extinction. This text had an enormous impact on the history of Buddha-nature thought in China, as it prompted intense discussions about the universality of future Buddhahood. While the first translation of the text, executed in the 5th century, contained a passage indicating that a certain group of deluded beings, called *icchantika*, would not attain Buddhahood, passages in later translations of the text were interpreted as confirming universal Buddhahood.⁶ The Chinese Buddhist schools that adopted the view of universal Buddhahood flourished, while the opposite view, namely, that a certain group of beings is prevented from reaching Buddhahood, did not gain popularity.

The *Mahāparinīrvāna Sutra* is one of four texts of the early period which expound on the notion of *tathāgatagārbha*.⁷ This early tradition was summarized in an important treatise, the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, also known as the *Uttaratantra*, a text which is dated early fifth century.⁸ This text understands itself as completing the teachings of the *Wisdom Sutras* on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), by correcting the misunderstanding of emptiness in a nihilistic sense. Thus, it presents the *Dharma*-body not simply as an impersonal truth-realm, but as a personal absolute characterized by four qualities: eternity, bliss, self and purity, identical to *Nīrvāna* and the realization of the highest truth.⁹ The *Dharma*-body embodies both the truth and the wisdom that realizes it. Thus it is the

accomplishment of “Self-benefit”: having shed the stains of defilement and trappings of ignorance, it embodies the wisdom and essence of the *Tathāgata*. The other two bodies are described as accomplishing the function of “Benefit for others:” the second preaches the *Dharma* to the *Bodhisattvas* of the heavenly realm, and the third appears in different times of history to teach and guide deluded beings to salvation.

The *Ratnagotravibhāga* expounds this teaching about the three bodies of the Buddha based on the message that “all living beings are the embryo of the *Tathāgata*,”¹⁰ meaning that their innate nature or *Dharma*-body is essentially the same as that of a perfectly realized Buddha. The only difference between sentient beings and the Buddha is that sentient beings have not yet shed the clouds of ignorance that keep the light of their true nature from shining as brilliantly as the sun. The removal of these clouds is therefore the basic goal of religious practice. The later two bodies of the Buddha actively support this practice as they guide sentient beings in their different states of spiritual development towards the realization of their true nature, which is Buddha-nature.

The important aspect of Buddha-Nature developed in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* is this: it works simultaneously for self-benefit, as its activity is geared towards full realization, and for benefit of others, since there are still numberless beings who have not yet realized their true nature. The same activity of the Buddha thus has two components — wisdom as expression of Self-benefit, and compassion as expression of benefit for others. Both components thus define the content of Buddha-Nature: Wisdom geared towards full realization, and actualization of this wisdom in compassion. This is, according to the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, the true nature of a Buddha and, as such, our true nature.¹¹ Buddha-Nature motivates the entire process of spiritual transformation and realization:

If the Buddha element were not present
 There would be no remorse over suffering
 There would be no longing for *nirvana*
 No striving and devotion towards this aim.¹²

The *Ratnagotravibhāga* became important in Tibet in its Tibetan translations, but the text that took up the ideas from this text and spread them China is the *Buddha Nature Treatise* (*Foxinglun*), a text that will be introduced in the next section. The very positive view of human nature expressed in all of these texts was adopted by the Chinese Buddhist Masters of the Tiantai, Huayen and Chan traditions and became an integral part of their teaching.

c) The *Buddha Nature Treatise*¹³

The authorship of this text as well as the dates on which it was authored are disputed. It is attributed to Vasubandhu and translated by Paramārtha (499–569); even though some scholars are convinced that it was written by Paramārtha, based on his familiarity with the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, whole passages of which reappear in this text.

There is no Tibetan translation or Sanskrit original preserved. The tentative dates given for its translation are between 557–569.

The *Buddha Nature Treatise* was widely studied in China and Japan, because it systematically expounds on the Buddha-Nature notion and defends its reality in all beings without exception. Many of the philosophical notions expressed in the text are in harmony with Chinese Buddhist thinking, especially with that of the Chan school. In her systematic study of the text, Sallie King enumerates the following components of the text that are foundational to Chinese Buddhist thought:

1. An emphasis on the positive nature of realization; a view of enlightenment as an experiential reality that goes beyond emptiness.
2. An optimistic conception of human nature based on the idea of a universal, active Buddha nature.
3. An ontology based on non-dualism, as opposed to monism, and expressed in the language of Thusness.
4. Subject-object non-dualism, the idea that mind and world arise together in mutual creation, whether in a deluded or an enlightened manner.
5. A positive view of phenomenal reality, based upon the views given in points 1 and 3.
6. The concept of a pivotal conversion experience from delusion to enlightenment or from impurity to purity.
7. The equation of Buddha nature and Buddhist practice (a view that ultimately becomes more representative of Japanese Buddhism, in Dōgen, than of Chinese).¹⁴

The Buddha Nature Treatise starts with a question: “Why did the Buddha speak of Buddha-Nature?” What the author is asking about here is the reason and importance of the Buddha nature for practice, not the notion itself. The answer given in the text is that Buddha-Nature helps people to overcome five shortcomings: inferior mind, arrogance, delusion, slandering the truth and attachment to Self. It helps them to develop diligent mind, reverence, wisdom (*prajñā*), knowledge and compassion. In other words, the notion of Buddha-Nature is an expedient means that helps people overcome ignorance and reach enlightenment.

While the author tries to clarify philosophical questions, the foremost concern of the treatise is *soteriological* — promoting practice and transformation in human beings. The author refutes any dogmatic positions that affirm Buddha-Nature either as something that “is” or deny it as something that “is not.” He argues that if one says that there is no Buddha nature, there will be an unbridgeable gap between Buddha and ordinary beings, and one will not be able to attain enlightenment. If, on the other hand, one affirms that there *is* Buddha-Nature, then the motivation for and transformation through practice gets lost. Why practice if one already is Buddha? Thus, both the ideas of there being or not being Buddha-Nature are to be rejected, since both exclude the dynamic reality of change. In summary, there are three basic points the author makes about Buddha-Nature:

- 1) It is correct to say that Buddha-Nature “aboriginally” exists, if this is understood as each person’s potential to realize Buddhahood, and not as an existence in opposition to non-existence.

- 2) Buddha-Nature is not an own-nature (*svabhāva*), since the idea of own-nature excludes process and change.
- 3) Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is not simply a matter of negation, there is also a positive revelation in emptiness. Therefore, emptiness does not conflict with a Buddha-Nature that is affirmed as aboriginally existing.

To clarify this last and very important point, the text states:

Attachments are not real, therefore they are called vacuous. If one gives rise to these attachments, true wisdom will not arise. *When one does away with these attachments, then we speak of Buddha-nature.* Buddha nature is Thusness revealed by the dual emptiness of persons and things. . . . If one does not speak of Buddha nature, then one does not understand emptiness.¹⁵

In this text, just as in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and other *tathāgatagarbha* texts, emptiness is not seen as limited to a negative function. It clears the way for something positive to emerge, and the positive that emerges is Buddha-Nature. The one who is not able to affirm this has not fully realized emptiness, but remains stuck in a negative concept.

The *Buddha Nature Treatise* also devotes lengthy discussions to Buddha-Nature as characterized by the three bodies of the Buddha. It is only possible to give the gist of it here. Buddha-Nature is divided into two “natures”: the “Buddha-Nature that dwells in itself,” namely the *dharmakāya* and the “emergent Buddha-Nature,” consisting of the *samboghakāya* and *nirmanakāya*. All three bodies combined constitute the fullness of Buddha-Nature, and all three are characterized by soteriological action. The soteriological characteristic of the *dharmakāya* is called “separation from barriers:”

There are three kinds of barriers: (1) the *kleśa* [defilement] barrier — the *arhat* who obtains the wisdom of liberation overcomes this barrier; (2) the *dhyāna* [meditation] barrier — in overcoming this barrier, *arhats* and *pratyekabuddhas* obtain complete liberation; (3) the all wisdom-barrier — this is what the *bodhisattva* path breaks through. By overcoming this barrier, they realize *sambodhi* [the Buddha’s wisdom]. In these three stages, the *Tathagata’s dharmakāya* only contends with three obstacles, *it is not itself defiled*.¹⁶

In this passage, the *dharmakāya* is described as breaking through the various barriers on the way to full realization. Since meditation and wisdom are not negative or obstacles *per se*, “breaking through” here is equivalent to the fulfillment of the path of enlightenment. The *dharmakāya* therefore is a dynamic reality that liberates from delusions and helps to overcome obstacles on the way. The second body (*samboghakāya*) is described as follows:

Because of the breadth and greatness of its power and function, this *kāya* aboriginally possesses three virtues: great wisdom (*prajñā*), great meditation (*samādhi*) and great compassion (*karunā*). The essential characteristic of great wisdom is nondiscriminative knowledge (*jnāna*). The essential characteristic of great meditation is uncreated mentation; i.e., mentation that has left behind [the

duality of] leaving [the world, i.e., saving oneself] and entering [the world; i.e., saving others]. The essential characteristic of great compassion is the ability to remove [sentient beings] from [suffering] and save them.

For the mentation of sentient beings to be caused to attain perfect fulfillment, three things are necessary: pleasure in the *Dharma*, the six super powers,¹⁷ and the giving of aid by removing [sentient beings] from their suffering. Thus great compassion removes [sentient beings] from the three evil paths of suffering and establishes people and *devas* in great peace. Great meditation brings about the arising of faithful joy by manifesting the six super-powers. Wisdom takes pleasure in the *Dharma* and realizes liberation. This is what is called the *samboghakāya*.¹⁸

The soteriological action of the *samboghakāya* is great compassion, which removes sentient beings from suffering. It is based on nondiscriminative awareness and non-dualistic thinking, which lead to the arising of joy. The paranormal powers are understood as means to attract others to the teaching, but not as ends in themselves. Like the *dharmakāya*, this body is not described in terms of substance but in terms of action entirely geared towards the salvation of others.

This is also the function of the *nirmanakāya*, which is equally based on compassion, meditation and wisdom:

Great compassion is the *nirmanakāya*'s basis. Meditation transmutes it into manifest form. Wisdom causes it to have five kinds of abilities: 1) it causes the arising of repugnance and fear [towards *samsāra*] 2) it causes people to enter the Noble Path, 3) it causes people to discard old attachments; 4) it brings about faithful joy in the great *Dharma*; and it 5) causes people to receive the prediction of great *bodhi*.¹⁹

This passage is followed by a list of fourteen acts which were performed for the benefit of sentient beings by Buddha Śakyamuni in his incarnation on earth. These acts are the most significant events in his life as *nirmanakāya*, which itself is seen as a compassionate act.

The text continues with a long discussion of the eternity of the Buddha bodies, but even though it gives ten reasons for this, "none" as Sallie King states, "of the ten reasons for eternity gives evidence of a thing or entity that lasts eternally. Instead, we see the author's characteristic desire to speak positively of the 'fruit' of realization; hence a positive conception of *nirvāṇa* as freedom from ignorance, from time, from every kind of limitation. Very much evident is the emphasis upon the Buddhas as beings who engage in ceaseless soteriological action, both expressing their own enlightenment and acting for the welfare of others. Finally, we see an emphasis on the Buddha's nondualistic participation in *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, their Thus-Gone-Thus-Come nature. None of these reasons for speaking of the Buddha bodies as eternal steps outside widely accepted Mahāyāna principles. None of these reasons requires us to construe the Buddha bodies as enduring entities."²⁰

Since the Buddha-Nature teaching has been and still is suspected by its critics as being close to the Hindu *Brahman-Ātman* doctrine, the classic texts promulgating the

Buddha-Nature notion attempt to distinguish the *tathāgatagārbha* from the Upaniṣadic *ātman*. One has to bear this in mind when reading statements such as the one of Paramārtha, who emphasizes that one cannot speak of Buddha-Nature as something that “is” or “is not,” or the declaration in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, which, upholding the line of thought of the great philosopher Nagārjuna, who had argued that one has to go beyond the affirmation of both *ātman* and *anātman* alike, says:

It is true self, since all conceptual elaboration
In terms of self and non-self are totally stilled.²¹

Buddha-Nature as Practice

The concept of Buddha-Nature had deep resonances within Chinese culture, which in turn helped it acquire its popularity in Chinese Buddhism. One resonance is the positive view of human nature, which corresponds to Mencius’ view of human nature as originally good. It was this positive view that was adopted by the Confucian tradition over and against the opposite view of human nature as evil, which had been espoused by Xunzi. Also, early Chinese understanding of Buddha-Nature was partly influenced by Taoism, as the universal reality of emptiness was understood as the working of the Tao, which arises from Nothingness (*wu*). Taoist thinking contributed to the emergence of the Chinese Chan school, which was in turn imported to Korea and Japan and is generally known in the West under its Japanese name, the Zen-school. Since it would be beyond the scope of this article to describe the Buddha-Nature concept and practices in the different Buddhist schools, I will just highlight its major aspects in the Chan school.

The notion that all beings are Buddha from the beginning, only that they have to realize it, led to two different approaches to practice in the Chinese Chan school. Shenxiu (605–705), who eventually became the first patriarch of the Northern School, maintained that realization of Buddha-Nature or, in other words, awakening, happens gradually through the purification of mind achieved in meditation. The verse he wrote about his enlightenment experience is as follows:

The body is the *Bodhi* Tree,
The mind is like a bright mirror standing.
Take care to wipe it diligently,
Keep it from all dust.²²

Refuting this view, Huineng (638–713), the first patriarch of the Southern School, expressed his insight that the purity of Buddha-nature is Awakening itself. Awakened nature is not a result of meditation, but can reveal itself anytime and anywhere. The verse he wrote in response to the one of Shenxiu says:

Bodhi originally has no tree
The bright mirror is nowhere standing.
Buddha-nature is forever clear and pure
Where can there be any dust?²³

The *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, a text that purports to convey the teachings of Huineng, conveys more of his thinking on the purity of Buddha-Nature as source of Awakening: “The nature of humankind is originally pure. It is because of false thoughts that true suchness is obscured. If you are free from delusions, the original nature reveals itself. As the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* says: At once, we gain clarity and recover the original mind. Good friends, when I was at Priest Hung-jen’s place, as soon as I heard him [recite the *Diamond Sutra*], I immediately gained great Awakening as I realized that true suchness was my original nature.”²⁴

Corresponding to the notion of gradual — versus “immediate” enlightenment, the two schools use different approaches to practice. While the Northern School (which is known under its Japanese name as Sôtô school) emphasizes the importance of seated meditation as practice leading to and expression of enlightenment, the Southern School (known as Rinzai School) uses additional work with a *Kôan* (*Gungan* in Chinese) to help students drop dualistic notions and experience sudden realization.

A *Kôan* is an anecdotal narrative which is handed down in the Zen tradition and used by the teacher to examine the student’s state of mind. The first *Kôan* in the collection *Gateless Gate* is usually the one given to a student at the beginning of his or her training with *Kôan*-work. It is as follows:

A monk asked Jôshu in all earnestness: ‘Does a dog have Buddha Nature or not?’
Jôshu said, ‘Mu!’²⁵

The student is asked to grasp the meaning of the Jôshu’s answer. If all beings have Buddha-Nature, as the teaching goes, then a dog is supposed to have Buddha-Nature as well. Why does the Master dismiss the question by saying “Mu,” which can be rendered into “No,” “Don’t,” “Nothing,” or “Nothingness.” The answer that the student has to bring to the teacher is one that has to be an expression of the experience of Buddha-Nature. One based on the concept of it is not accepted.

The Sôtô school’s understanding of seated meditation not only as means to enlightenment but, more importantly, as embodiment and expression of enlightenment, was introduced to it by its Japanese founder Dôgen (1200–1253), who became a monk at age 13. He was troubled by the religious paradox inherent in the teaching of Buddha-Nature and its implication for religious practice. Seeking answers to the question of why, if all beings already have Buddha-nature, one feels the longing for awakening and has to engage in religious practice, he sought out various teachers in Japan before embarking on a trip to China in 1253. Under the guidance of his Chinese Master Rujing (1163–1228), he came to an enlightenment experience that he described as the “dropping off of body and mind.” This experience resolved all of his previous doubts, and he returned home to Japan with the new insight that seated meditation is itself the very expression of enlightenment, and that it is the same with every other daily act in life in the monastery, from waking up in the morning, participating in the religious services and common meals etc., until going to bed at night. It is this insight

that Dôgen strove to teach to his disciples and is also expressed in the opening lines of his short treatise entitled “General Principles of Seated Meditation”:

Now, the way is intrinsically perfect and all-pervasive. What then is the point of distinguishing practice and realization? The supreme vehicle is absolute freedom. What is the point of exerting effort to attain it? The entire body is indeed beyond all defilements. What is all the concern with the means to polish it clean from these? It is never separate from this very place. What is the point of going off on pilgrimage of practice to get there? Yet if there is even a hair's breath of distinction, it makes for a difference that is like between heaven and earth. Once even an iota of thought of difference or conforming arises, the purity of mind is lost.²⁶

Of course, this text has to be understood in the context of strict monastic practice and not as a license to engage in laziness. The point is that the realization of Buddha-Nature is not something different from practice, but that it manifests itself in every place and time, that it is “never separate from this very place.” All things and all actions are in itself the manifestation of original Buddha-Nature. This realization led Dôgen to claim: “All beings *are* Buddha-Nature” — which is different from saying that all living beings *have* Buddha-Nature.²⁷ All beings — which includes all forms of life, from mountains, rivers, trees and blades of grass to animals, humans and the ordinary states of one's mind — all these are pure manifestations of Buddha-Nature. If we make a “hair's breath of distinction” — if we distinguish in a dualistic, conceptual way between living and non-living things, and further, between our Buddha-Nature and our ordinary mind and body, we have not yet attained realization. But if, according to Dôgen, we realize the non-dualistic fact of true existence, we realize the Buddha-Nature that *is* all beings.

Concluding Thoughts

In the preceding pages I have attempted to delineate in broad strokes the concept of Buddha-Nature, taking its development from the initial idea expressed in the *Lotus Sutra* that all living beings are sons and daughters of the Buddha, and that the Buddha is eternal. I have shown how the most influential among the *Tathâgatagârbbha* texts have related this notion to and explained it through the three bodies of the Buddha and, finally, how the notion of Buddha-Nature has formed different approaches to practice and realization in the Chan or Zen school. It is apparent that a notion which holds that all beings are Buddhas from the beginning, only that they have to realize it, or, to put it in Dôgen's terms, that all beings are as such manifestations of enlightened nature, would lend itself very well as basis for interfaith dialogue, since it is so inclusive. If even blades of grass and dogs have or are Buddha-Nature, surely all human beings, including Muslims, Christians, Hindus and adherents of other religious traditions, have or are it as well. The mostly peaceful way in which Buddhism spread from India to the rest of Asia and to the West is an indication for the way in which an inclusive notion informs religious practice and shapes the way in which its practitioners relate to practitioners of other religions. Why, in principle, there is no problem for Buddhists to recognize

Buddha-Nature in adherents of other religions or members of other cultures, the present-day conflict between Buddhists and Hindu Tamils in Sri Lanka, or between Buddhists and Muslims in the South of Thailand and Ladakh, for example, shows that no teaching is immune from distortions caused by political and ethnic ambitions.

On the other hand, an inclusive notion such as Buddha-Nature may have its drawbacks for interfaith dialogue precisely because of its inclusiveness. It may detract from or prevent the genuine interest that a religious practitioner has to invest in the exploration of both the commonalities and differences between religions, if meaningful interfaith dialogue is to take place. Otherwise, both sides engage in pleasant conversations which may or may not hide the underlying feeling of superiority of one's own position and insight. For meaningful dialogue to take place there needs to be a sincere and humble seeking of understanding which precludes a position of superiority.

The first question a Buddhist might ask a Muslim in a conversation about Buddha-Nature is whether a corresponding concept exists in the Muslim tradition. And even though a notion such as all beings have Buddha-Nature seems straightforward and easy to understand at first, it is not so if we look at the complexity and multiple implications of this notion, which have been presented, developed and explained in lengthy *sutras* and treatises of which I have only attempted to present the most basic ideas.

I would like to suggest here that the conversation could take its starting point on the Muslim side from 'Ibn Arabi's equally complex notion of the Muhammadan reality (*baqīqa muhammadiyya*), which, according to him, is the essence (*sirr*) of the "Perfect Human Being" (*al-insān al-kāmil*). The Muhammadan reality is the archetypal reality of the prophet, the divine word that, in historical time, reveals itself in the different prophets and messengers, reaches its fullness in the prophet of Islam and expresses itself through the saints. The Muhammadan reality is actualized in the perfect human being, also an archetypal image, the epitome of divine self-disclosure, which has both terrestrial and cosmic significance: "the very spirit of the whole world of Being, a being summing up and gathering together in himself all the elements that are manifested in the universe."²⁸

'Ibn Arabi is often upheld as an advocate of religious tolerance, the spirit of which is so beautiful expressed in this famous verse:

My heart is capable of every form
A cloister of the monk, a temple for idols,
A pasture for gazelles, the votary's Kaaba,
The tables of the Thora, the Koran.
Love is the creed I hold: wherever turn
His camels, love is still my creed and faith.²⁹

If the notion of Buddha-Nature describes the potential of human beings to become fully enlightened as well as the reality of the universe from a Mahāyāna Buddhist point

of view, the notion of the Muhammadan Reality might be taken as corresponding to this from the Muslim tradition, as interpreted by 'Ibn Arabi. Both notions could therefore serve as starting points for careful and in-depth conversations between the two traditions, which presupposes in-depth knowledge of the complexity and multi-dimensionality of each notion among its proponents. In this way, Buddha-Nature and Muhammadan Reality could serve as building blocks for the much needed bridge of understanding, one which derives its graceful firmness not from plastering over the rough edges of difference, but from keeping them in creative tension of movement towards each other.

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Endnotes

1. The websites are gflp.org and mwr.org.tw. See also Bhikkhuni Liao Yi, Maria Reis Habito, eds, *Listening. Buddhist-Muslim Dialogues 2002–04* (Taipei: The Museum of World Religions Development Foundation, 2005).
2. In chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra*, entitled Skillful means. Translation by Gene Reeves, *The Lotus Sutra* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 91.
3. Aṅguttara Nikāya 4: 61, quoted in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006), 105.
4. Dīgha Nikāya III, quoted in Ruben L.F. Habito, "The Trikāya Doctrine in Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, eds. D.W. Chappel and G.J. Tanabe, Jr. (University of Hawaii, 1986), 53–62, 54.
5. For an excellent introduction to the history of Buddha-Nature thought in the different Chinese Buddhist schools, see Sallie King, *Buddha Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
6. *Ibid.*, 14.

7. The other texts are the *Tathāgatagārbha Sutra*, the *Śrīmālādevi-simbanāda-sutra*, the *Anūnatvapūrnava-nirdeśa* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra*, which were composed in India between 200 and 350 C.E. For a short description of these texts, see *ibid.*, 12–14.

8. The text is extant in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan. The Sanskrit version has been studied and translated into English by Takasaki Jikidō, *A Study on the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra) Being a Treatise on the Tathāgatagārbha Theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Serie Orientale Roma No. 33 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Orientale, 1966).

9. King, 16.

10. In Takasaki Jikidō's translation: "The mass of living beings is, O Śariputra, nothing but a synonym of the Matrix of the Tathāgata (*tathāgatagarbha*). The Matrix of the Tathāgata is, Śariputra, nothing but a synonym of the Absolute Body (*dharmakāya*)." Jikido, 143.

11. Habito, 59.

12. Ratnagotravibhāga 1:40, Schmidt-Leukel, 2006, 111.

13. Foxing Lun, attributed to Vasubandhu but translated by Paramārtha (499–569), *Taishō Shinsbū Daizōkyō* 31, no. 1610: 787–813.

14. King, *op cit.*, 27.

15. T. 1610, 787b; King, 40.

16. T. 1610, 810a; King, 70.

17. "The abilities to see everything, hear everything, know the thoughts of others, know the previous lives of oneself and others, perform various wonders and know that the defilements are extinct." King, 179, note 12.

18. T. 1610, 810c; King, 73.

19. T. 1610, 810c; King, 74.

20. King, 81.

21. *Ratnagotravibhāga* 1:37, Schmidt-Leukel, 112.

22. In Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism. Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 203.

23. *Ibid.*, 203.

24. *Ibid.*, 204.

25. Kōun Yamada, translator and commentator, *Gateless Gate* (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1979, 1990), 11.

26. *Fukan Zazengi*, in Habito, 120.

27. Mitchell, 266.

28. Quote in Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 205–206.

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"Die before you die": Death Meditation as Spiritual Technology of the Self in Islam and Buddhism

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"Death is the mother of spiritual life."

— Erasmus (*De praeparatione ad mortem*, 1534)

Many of the world's religions specialize at interiorizing a knowledge of death as an integral strategy for ethical formation and spiritual development. That one could initiate a catalytic process of "dying" spiritually while remaining firmly anchored in the stream of living is widely attested in the history of religions but has not been well understood or adequately studied as a cross-cultural phenomenon. Yet, this linking of the transiency of life with the need for moral and spiritual progress is a principle concern that has a long destiny across a broad spectrum of religious cultures throughout the world. From the polytheistic pagans of antiquity to the monotheistic Muslims and Trinitarian Christians of the medieval and modern era we frequently encounter expressions that speak of death not as something you experience once at the end of life but as something you learn to experience again and again throughout your life:

One must spend an entire lifetime in learning how to live, and, which may surprise you more, an entire lifetime in learning how to die.

— Seneca (*d. 65 CE*)

For thirty years have I been preparing myself for death; were it to come to me now there would be nothing I would wish to postpone.

— *al-Qa' qā' ibn Hakīm* (c. 7–8th century)

O the unspeakable sorrow of mine heart! Why have I so given me to vanities, and why in all my life learned I not to die!

— Henry Suso (*Horologium Sapientiae*, 1327–1334)

My Lord, it is a great art to die well, and to be learnt by men in health . . .

— Jeremy Taylor (*The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying*, 1651)

On one level, the practice of learning how to die while living constitutes one of the essential skills in the art of living (*ars vivendi*), indispensable for rendering absurd the

glamour of vanity: “Meditate again and again” on death, insists the renowned Tibetan scholar Tsong-kha-pa (1357–1419), “until you have turned your mind away from the activities of this life, which are like adorning yourself while being led to the execution ground.”¹ At the level of ontology, however, the injunction to train one’s self to “die” before dying also corresponds with a moral imperative that obligates the practitioner to decipher the true nature of his or her being and, by so doing, undergo a process of self-transformation that is decisive. Nowhere was this given more succinct force than in seventeenth century feudal Japan when the Rinzai master Shidō Bunan (1603–1676) famously declared:

Die while alive, and be completely dead,
Then do whatever you will, all is good.²

What accounts for the particular value of this exercise is the fact that not only must one’s entire life be thoroughly transformed but this process is integral to the moral life. Indeed, this is not simply a question of learning how to anticipate death, of being prepared for death, of attaining the proper state of mind at the moment of death, of understanding what happens when you die or after you die, or why you die, or even the hope of achieving a “good death” (*ars moriendi*) in the final moment of life. These are all, of course, immensely important concerns but, in actuality, they are the result of something far more fundamental: the wide-spread recognition that the scandal of death demands of one a transformation of the self as a living subject and moral agent. In the specific context of Islam and Buddhism, the two traditions we shall examine here, concomitant with this demand is the acquisition of a certain knowledge of the self, of understanding the spiritual necessity and urgency of “dying” before dying, and the realization that such a “death” must be achieved while one is still very much alive here, now, in this body, in this world, and not in some other form or future state of existence.³

Before proceeding there are several caveats to which I would like to draw attention. The first has to do with the fact that the comparative study of religions has, at least until recently, always been more interested in a history of cosmologies, of origins, essences, ideas, structures, canons, doctrines, and beliefs rather than in a comparative history of actual practices. This means that a comparative history of interpreting spiritual practices whose specific aim is to cultivate a persistent awareness of death has never been undertaken.⁴ The second caveat has to do with the comparative nature of this inquiry. One might ask, why have I chosen to focus attention on Islam and Buddhism and not adopted the more common approach of comparing Islam, for example, with Christianity, or Buddhism with Hinduism, two traditions which exerted considerable influence over time on the kinds of ascetic practices adopted in the respective developments of Islam and Buddhism? To this question I can offer several responses: first, the history of contact between Muslims and Buddhists is almost as old as Islam itself, particularly along the trade routes and in the merchant centers of Central, South, and Southeast Asia beginning from the late 7th and 8th centuries of the common era and continuing down to the present.

Yet, comparisons between Islam and Buddhism, whether purely academic or interfaith-based, remain relatively unexplored and undeveloped in the study of religion.⁵ Second, the flaring of ethnic tensions in recent years between Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Ladakh, along with the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001, suggests there is a growing need to thwart the scourge of violent conflict and intolerance. Perhaps greater analytical attention and genuine dialogue within and across Islamic and Buddhist cultures can make a positive contribution toward the eradication of some of the more pernicious effects of interreligious illiteracy. Third, by comparing Islam and Buddhism we find ourselves faced with two cumulative traditions which, if seen only from the abstract vantage point of belief and doctrine could not be more dissimilar, yet if approached from the level of practice nevertheless share strikingly similar methods in their approach to the transformation of the self prior to death. But this brings us to my final caveat and that is to ask if such a study is even possible. Given that the historical, cultural, and geographic trajectory of both Islam and Buddhism is characterized by an astonishing range of internal diversity whilst at the center of those differences are diverse conceptions of the self, of subjectivity, of agency, and of death, could they nonetheless share, to some degree of abstraction, this notion of a transformed self, a self that needs to be reformed, reshaped, or recreated, a self, that is, that must “die” prior to succumbing to physical death? Furthermore, before assuming that such an inquiry is possible we must also ask, of what does this “self” that must “die” consist and what, precisely, is it that “dies” even as one lives? Moreover, what are people seeking to achieve by taking up such a practice? Indeed, what are the specific practices aimed at mobilizing a new level of subjective experience with reflection on death as its central object? What types of training and experiments must be undertaken if one is to successfully imagine being at or near the point of death? Finally, I wish also to pose the opposite question: What must one know about oneself in order to be willing to submit to a practice of dying before dying? And how does this knowledge of the self, gained through a sustained contemplation of the terrors of finitude, become generative of a new reflexivity of the self?

In the absence of a critical literature and framework for undertaking a comparative examination of dying as a spiritual practice, perhaps the most suitable site for situating such an investigation is in the broader context of ascetical studies. This has become an exciting and impressive field of inquiry in recent years insofar as it has successfully recast the study of asceticism as a truly cross-cultural phenomenon.⁶ While no analytical attention has been given to the specific exercises associated with the practice of dying as a spiritual technology of the self, I have nevertheless found a great deal of inspiration in the theoretical insights of this new literature and, in particular, the invaluable work of Gavin Flood and Richard Valantasis, each of whom has recently published monographs on asceticism that offer the study of religion provocative new criterion for a comparative analysis.⁷ Flood’s general claim that asceticism is a voluntary “performance of the memory of tradition” aimed at “shaping the narrative of a life in accordance with the narrative of tradition” is further nuanced by Valantasis’s theory that asceticism not only

entails the intentional creation and articulation of an alternative subjectivity through “intentional performances” but that the “ascetic constructs an entirely new agency capable of functioning in a different and resistant way to the dominant culture that defines identity, personality, and social functions.”⁸

To begin to understand how this works in the context of Islam and Buddhism, we will start by considering death meditation practices associated with the life and literary works of al-Ghazālī, a Muslim jurist-theologian and polymath who lived from the mid-eleventh to the early twelfth century in present-day Iran, and whose highly influential *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn*) includes an entire book on the *Remembrance of Death* (*Kitāb dhikr al-mawt wa-mā ba’dahu*). We then turn to analogous practices advocated by the Buddha, as recorded in Pāli canonical sources, and today undertaken by some of the most prominent forest monks of modern Thailand including two related practices: *asubba-bhāvanā* (meditation on the foulness of the body) and *marāṇasati* (mindfulness of death), both of which can be found throughout the Buddhist world but are particularly associated with the Theravāda Buddhist tradition systematized by the fifth century Indian commentator and scholar Buddhaghosa.

Al-Ghazālī and the Remembrance of Death

For every voyage there must be provisions; therefore adopt the fear of God as provisions for your voyage from this world into the Afterlife. . . harbor longing and fear . . . for, by God, the man who does not know whether he will awaken at the end of the night, or live through the morning to the evening, can have no high hopes, for it may be that between these times lie the hooks of fate.

— ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz⁹

Born in Ṭūs, a district in northeast Iran, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (c. 448/1056 – 505/1111) played a prominent role in articulating an Islam relevant to a rapidly growing and politically stable post-conquest faith community. After an extensive period of apprenticeship, Ghazālī was appointed to a professorship in Baghdād where he wrote prodigiously on Muslim law, political theology, and logic, but he is perhaps best known in the West for his work in philosophy, ethics, and mysticism. He was the first Muslim theologian to successfully integrate Aristotelian logics into the rationalist tradition of Islamic theology (*kalām*) and managed to do so without also adopting Aristotelian ontology.¹⁰ He did this by writing manuals of magisterial exposition generally regarded as the *summa theologica* of Islam — summaries of theory and practice that contributed substantially to the systematized evolution of Islamic theology. These works remain among the most authoritative treatments of orthodoxy and for this reason he is often compared to Maimonides and St. Thomas Aquinas in stature. But it was his ability to forge an important intellectual bridge between the Arabicity of Islam and the Neoplatonic Hellenized cultures of Christian Europe that insured his sphere of influence would extend far beyond the world for whom he initially wrote.

What interests us here, however, is the Ghazālī who authored two highly influential texts written after he famously abandoned his prestigious professorship and set out on a long pilgrimage throughout the Islamic East. The first is the *Deliverance from Error* (*Al-munqidh min al-ḍalāl*), his spiritual autobiography, which documents his transformation from being one of the most celebrated and visible intellectuals in Baghdad into someone who shunned fame and riches (*al-jāh wa-l-māl*) to embrace the ascetic life of a Sufi.¹¹ What provoked this new direction is described by Ghazālī as a moment of intense self-scrutiny in which a voice calls out to him:

I considered the circumstances of my life and realized that I was caught in a veritable thicket of attachments. I also considered my teaching and lecturing . . . [I] examined my motive . . . and realized that it was not a pure desire for the things of God, but that the impulse moving me was the desire for an influential position and public recognition. . . . Worldly desires were striving to keep me by their chains just where I was, while the voice of faith was calling, “To the road! To the road! What is left of life is little and the journey before you is long. All that keeps you busy, both intellectually and practically, is but hypocrisy and delusion. If you do not prepare now for eternal life, when will you prepare? If you do not now sever these attachments, when will you sever them?”¹²

Of course, this theme of being ensnared by attachments, delusions, and the pursuit of worldly desires has its equivalent in Buddhism, as it does in practically every major religion. But this obligation to review one’s motives and drives, which is a constant preoccupation with Ghazālī, is clearly more evocative of the ethos that governs the monastic culture of renunciation (*zuhd*) and the need to detach one’s self from the things of the world (*tabattul*). But he procrastinates under the persuasion of a second voice, the voice of *Iblīs* or Satan, exhorting him not to abandon his professorship on the rationale that he may never again be able to return to the comforts of such a dignified life. An internal struggle ensues over the course of several months until one day he stands to deliver a lecture and finds he cannot speak.¹³ Grieved by this sudden impotence of voice, he suffers a loss of appetite and becomes mentally fatigued. Unable to treat the ailment his doctors recommend the anxiety which has overpowered his heart be allayed. In response, Ghazālī reasons that the matter which so preoccupied him prior to the onset of his vocal disability is no longer one of choice but compulsion: incapable of teaching, he establishes a trust fund to provide financial support for his family and embarks on a tour of the principal holy sites of Islam. His travels take him first to Damascus, where he takes up residence in the southwestern minaret of the Great Umayyad Mosque. Several years later he is living within the precinct of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and visiting the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. He eventually makes his way to Mecca and Medina in Arabia to perform the Hajj and visit the Tomb of the Prophet Muhammad before returning to his family in Iran.

During this period of pilgrimage and purgation, the malady brought on by the internal struggle with his self intensifies a thirst for the mystical path of Sufism. Ghazālī pledges to abandon the pursuit of knowledge that leads only to worldly success and

takes refuge in God invoking the famous words of the Prophet Muhammad: “The true Flight (hijrah) is the flight from evil, and the real Holy War (jihād) is the warfare against one’s passions.”¹⁴ He describes spending years living in seclusion (*‘uzla*) confined to the minaret of a mosque engaged in solitary meditation (*tafakkur*) and various other religious and ascetic exercises for improving his character, purifying his soul, and cleansing his heart “completely from what is other than God.”¹⁵

At the heart of these exercises was the remembrance of death. Ghazālī devised a series of meditations on death or, rather, a training for making death an actuality in one’s daily life. Indeed, these were not just reminders that death could strike at any time, or that one was fated to die. They were spiritual techniques for evoking the possibility of experiencing death so that one might live each day as if it were the last. To accomplish this, Ghazālī proposed organizing the rhythms of one’s day by giving them a very precise structure. Since present “activities are judged by the closing one,” he provides instructions on how one should go to bed at night:

When you want to go to sleep, lay out your bed pointing to Mecca, and sleep on your right side, the side on which the corpse reclines in the tomb. Sleep is the similitude of death and waking of the resurrection. . . . Remember that in like manner you will lie in the tomb, completely alone; only your works will be with you, only the effort you have made will be rewarded . . . As you go to sleep say: “In Thy name, Lord, I live and die and with Thee, O God, do I take refuge . . .”¹⁶

Because sleep is the semblance of death the resurrection of the dead has its symbolic counterpart in rising from bed. This is why Ghazālī insists that one must wake before daybreak and offer, as the day’s first activity of the heart, a laudatory prayer in acknowledgement of one’s absolute dependence on God: “Praise be to God Who has made us alive after making us dead; to Him are we raised up again.” One is not permitted to speak before sun rise but is encouraged to reflect upon the shortness of life:

Do not cherish long hopes . . . for death does not come upon us at a specified time or in a specified way or at a specified age . . . perhaps there remains but a single day of your allotted span, perhaps but a single breath. Imagine this in your heart every day and impose upon yourself patience in obeying God daily. . . . continue in this routine for the rest of your life.¹⁷

As with the discipline of prayer in Islam, this practice of remembrance (*dhikr*), of dying daily, constitutes the central reality of one’s life. Ghazālī specifies twenty as the number of times one should recall death in a day and night. To facilitate this, it is not enough that one assume the position of a corpse while lying in bed each night. One should go further by digging a grave in one’s home and sleeping in it so as to better imagine how the body, as a corpse, actively undergoes the process of decay. Ghazālī cites the example of Al-Rabī ibn Khuthaym, who explains why he found it necessary to take-up this practice: “Were the remembrance of death to leave my heart for a single hour,” he was wont to say, “it would become corrupted.”¹⁸

The need to guard against the moral corruption of the heart by contemplating the physical corruption of the body was not limited to men alone. Women, too, found it necessary to envision their own bodies and the bodies of others undergoing a process of putrefaction; not, however, by sleeping in a grave but by maintaining a regular practice of graveyard visitation. Ghazālī recounts the practice of one such woman:

There once was an old woman . . . who was much given to worship. Whenever night fell she would tighten her belt and stand up in her prayer-niche to pray, then, when daybreak came she would go out to the graves, where the greater part of her day would be spent. I was told that she was reproached for visiting graveyards so frequently, and that she replied, “The hard heart which has become rough is softened only by the tokens of decay. When I make my way to the graves it is as though their inmates have emerged from beneath their surfaces and I am gazing at those putrefied faces, those altered bodies, and those bloated shrouds.”¹⁹

Building on this woman’s practice, Ghazālī gives instructions for engaging in a remembrance of ones peers and colleagues (*aṣḥāb*) who have passed away. One must first recall their devotion to living, their heedlessness, the sound of their laughter, and the pleasures they enjoyed. With these images clearly in mind, one is then instructed to bring to mind how “the earth has now obliterated the beauty of their forms, and how their parts have been scattered in their tombs,” how that same friend or colleague “used to go hither and thither” and “now his feet and joints have rotted away, how he used to speak, while now the worm has devoured his tongue, how he used to laugh, while now the dust has consumed his teeth.”²⁰

If the best medicine to induce one to contemplate death with all one’s heart is to carefully examine the manner in which family, friends, and acquaintances have died and to contrast this with how all were once, as Ghazālī describes it, “engrossed” in the frivolities of the world, then the best antidote for counteracting such negligence, and this was of paramount importance, is to turn one’s attention to the self, to imagine one’s own death; and not just imagine that you would die some day, but the idea was to effect an “immediate experience” (*dhawq* — literally “tasting”)²¹ of death, the result of which would be a decisive reorientation of the moral compass and direction of one’s life. But there are certain obstacles or psychological barriers that discourage this turn to the self. The engrossed, the man of ignorance, explains Ghazālī, often imagines that he will be following the funeral cortèges of others, but:

. . . never imagines that his own cortège will some day be followed, because witnessing the demise of others is something which is often repeated and has become familiar. But as far as his own death is concerned, he has no experience of it, and cannot imagine that he will experience it, for it has never transpired; and when it does it will never do so again: it will be the first and the final time.²²

The difficulty with imagining our own mortality, explains Ghazālī, is due neither to a lack of familiarity with death nor to a denial of death but to a certain proclivity toward two common tendencies: on the one hand is the predilection to habituate and routinize

death by associating it exclusively with others and, on the other, is a misplaced confidence in ourselves, particularly in our youth or good health. Given that “for every old man that dies a thousand children and young men pass away,” given that death has “no fixed time as to youth, middle age, or decrepitude, and that it does not know winter from summer, autumn from spring, or day from night,”²³ this inclination to harbor faith in our youth and good health, argues Ghazālī, is not only unwarranted but spiritually dangerous because it renders death’s proximity as improbable, distant, and far off in the future. “Yet death,” as the Ḥadīth reminds the engrossed man, “is drawing even closer than his sandal’s thong.”²⁴

The best weapon for defeating these dual tendencies is to be mindful of the nearness of death. For Ghazālī, meditating on the death of others is absolutely essential if one is to manifest a palpable sense of the immediacy of death. But there is a risk of undermining the overall objective if this functions merely as a psychological device for neglecting the imminence of one’s own mortality. Contemplating the death of others must always be understood as a preliminary training toward the main event: cultivating an experience of one’s own death. To accomplish this, Ghazālī provides instructions for visualizing a funeral cortège being followed on its way to the graveyard as one’s own ceremonial procession. After envisioning one’s body being interred in the grave one must then bear witness to the stages of putrefaction it is about to undergo:

Let man in every hour look to his limbs and his extremities. Let his thoughts dwell upon how the worms . . . devour them, and upon the fashion in which his bones shall rot away. Let him wonder whether the worms are to begin with the pupil of his right eye or his left.²⁵

The need to visually experience the sanctity of one’s own body being violated by the organic processes of putrefaction was not, it seems, an occasional exercise but was something one was expected to perform *every hour*. Like the Liturgy of Hours constituting the Divine Office in the Christians’ daily prayer, the remembrance of death was a practice that structured one’s entire day: “You must not be slack in the ordering of your time,” Ghazālī insisted, “keep a strict reckoning with yourself and regulate your occupations and activities throughout the night and day. . . . with matters which will benefit you in the next life.”²⁶ We might suppose that the pronoun used in the previous sentence tells us Ghazālī was speaking specifically to the more ascetically-inclined, particularly those who identified with the Sufi path of Islam. But, as we have already seen in the previous example of the old woman whose practice entailed corpse contemplations during her daily graveyard visitations, diligence in making the recollection of death a constant preoccupation was incumbent upon all Muslims. This included political leaders as well. Ghazālī relates the story of how ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, an Umayyad Caliph famous for his piety, was visited one day by a jurist who was horrified by the ruler’s changed countenance (owing, we are told, to the strain of excessive worship). In response to the jurist’s petrified gaze, the Caliph explains:

Could you but see me three days after having been set in my grave, when the pupils of my eyes have come forth and flowed across my cheeks, when my lips have shriveled back over my teeth, when my mouth has opened and the pus run out, when my belly is inflated and rises above my chest, when my spine protrudes from my rear, and when the worms and the pus have emerged from my nostrils; then you would behold something far more remarkable than that which you see now.²⁷

These are clearly not the words of someone who simply *imagines* dying. The intimate level of detail given here bears the unmistakable traces of a keen observer: putrefaction of the human body was a process the Caliph witnessed first-hand, indeed studied, *in situ*. It is possible he was not alone in this effort for we also are told: “Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz used every night to gather together the doctors of the Law, and they would remind one another of death, the Arising and the Afterlife until they broke out in tears as though at a funeral.”²⁸ Of course, the ability to minutely scrutinize a corpse in relation to one’s own body and use its constituent parts as an object and organizing principle for reflecting on death is a practice that is central to Buddhist monasticism and it is to this we now turn.

“Death lies within us”: Buddhism and the Path of Purification

Now when a man is truly wise
His constant task will surely be
This recollection about death.

— *Buddhaghosa (5th century CE)*

The account given in the Pāli canon of the Buddha’s life before his enlightenment is sparse in detail. But the incident culminating in Prince Siddhartha’s decision to go forth in the Great Renunciation from the settled life of a house-holder to that of a wandering ascetic who becomes the Awakened One (Buddha) is described. The well-known account centers on his first encounter with three individuals: an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. In each case his anxiety is aroused but, actually, it is the encounter with death that catalyzes his decision to abandon a life of riches and palace pleasures for the holy life of a mendicant:

Whilst I had such power and good fortune, yet I thought: “When an untaught ordinary man, who is subject to death, not safe from death, sees another who is dead, he is shocked, humiliated and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to death, not safe from death, and so it cannot befit me to be shocked, humiliated and disgusted on seeing another who is dead.” When I considered this, the vanity of life entirely left me. . . .

I shaved off my hair and beard — though my mother and father wished otherwise and grieved with tearful faces — and I put on the yellow robe and went forth from the house life into homelessness.²⁹

The first two signs, old age and sickness, never developed into prominent subjects of meditation in Buddhism but mindfulness of death became immensely important, even integral, to the advent and development of Buddhist monasticism. For this reason, although the need to reflect on death and one's own mortality finds expression in a variety of contexts, it is perhaps most commonly associated with the life and training of a *bhikkhu* (monk). Not surprisingly, the first inducement to such reflection entails a ritualized reenactment of the occasion in the Buddha's life when this powerful link between death and the Great Renunciation was first enunciated: the ordination ceremony known as *Upasampadā*, the procedure by which a young man who has freely decided to leave the care of his family can formerly enter the fraternity of monks (*sangha*).

In the Theravāda Buddhist world of South and Southeast Asia, this initial association between death and monasticism is most evident at the penultimate moment in the ordination of a novice when the ordinand sits directly in front of his *Upajjhāya* (Preceptor) with his palms held reverently together and his legs folded to one side. His head and face have been shorn of hair and the regal cloth that covered his upper torso is also removed. He exists at this moment in a liminal state of utter nakedness. The *Upajjhāya* receives from the ordinand a set of robes and instructs the applicant in the basic knowledge of the Triple Gem (the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha), explaining that it is to this place one must now go for refuge. The ordinand is then given his first instruction in meditation. He is to commit to memory the following five parts of the body and must publically recite them in forward and reverse orders as follows:

Kesā — hair of the head
Lomā — hair of the body
Nakhā — nails
Dantā — teeth
Taco — skin
 (Reverse Order)
Taco — skin
Dantā — teeth
Nakhā — nails
Lomā — hair of the body
Kesā — hair of the head

After the novice repeats the Pāli names of these parts, the *Upajjhāya* instructs the applicant on how these parts are to be regarded: "They are unclean, unattractive, lifeless, and unsubstantial" (*Asuci, jegucchā, patikālā, nijīvā, nissattā*). The *Upajjhāya* then takes the *angsa* (the shoulder-cloth) and puts it over the applicant's head to cover his left shoulder before handing back to him the rest of the robes and ordering the ordinand to go out and put them on. Like a child the ordinand crawls on his knees before departing the assembly and walks to a suitable place outside the hall where he will be wrapped in the robes of a monk.

The ordination of a *bhikkhu* signifies, not a transformation of the self, but a change in one’s status from layperson to monk. There are two important aspects of this transition we want to emphasize: obviously, one’s identity as a lay person must undergo a ritual death so as to be re-born, as it were, a son of the Buddha.³⁰ But this type of “initiatory death” must be recognized as an external category of symbolic death and therefore does not constitute a practice of dying before dying.³¹ Rather, it operates at the ceremonial level of performance and tells us nothing about how the novice himself actually perceives, interprets, and internalizes this process. What interests us more, however, is the second aspect of this drama — the instruction the ordinand receives in meditation known as *kammattḥāna* — a technical term meaning “the place of work (or basis of work)”³² — it refers to such things as the hair on the head, hair on the body, and so on and so forth. The initial list of five body parts given to the ordinand as his first meditation subject is eventually expanded to a much longer list of individual anatomical parts, organs, and fluids. It is through this method of contemplation that one begins the process of “dying before dying” which is our chief concern.

This use of the body as an object for meditation has several aims. In the first place, this “work” is an exercise aimed at de-familiarizing the meditator with his self in relationship to his body. Contemplating various parts of the body in this way drives home the realization that there is nothing inherently enduring or beautiful in any particular aspect of the body. In *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Buddhaghosa emphasizes again and again the loathsome aspects of each part. His reflection on head hairs, for example, reminds us that upon seeing “hair in a nice bowl of gruel or rice, people get disgusted and say, ‘It’s mixed with hair, take it away!’ ”³³ A central function of concentrating on the repulsive nature of the body and its parts is this potential for countering conceit by reducing one’s attachment to the body. However, when looked at more closely, we can see that it is, in fact, a meditation on death. Bhikkhu Khantipālo reminds us that the common denominator of these five elements is that they are all dead matter:

It is a remarkable thing that the . . . five parts on this list — the “person” we see — are all dead! Hair of the head and body lives only at its roots; we see dead hair. Nails that we see are dead nails; the quick is painful and hidden. The teeth, all that is visible, are dead, and their tender living roots we only experience painfully from time to time. Outer skin is dead — horrible if it was not, for it is sensitive enough already. . . . So when we get excited about a visual form — some one else’s body — we are stimulated by impressions of what has died already.³⁴

The final meditation practice among the body contemplations involves visualizing a corpse undergoing various stages of decay and comparing this to one’s own body. The meditator is to visualize a specific aspect of the corpse and then reflect that one’s own body will suffer the same fate. By this means one comes to a direct awareness of the “three marks” of all conditioned phenomena: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (no-[substantial] self). In a well-known passage from the *Satipatṭhāna*

Sutta (*The Foundations of Mindfulness*), the Buddha famously instructs an assembly of bhikkhus to compare their own body with what they would see in a charnel ground:

Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter . . . devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms . . . a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews . . . a skeleton without flesh and blood . . . disconnected bones scattered in all directions — here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here an arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull . . . bleached white, the color of shells . . . bones heaped up, more than a year old . . . bones rotted and crumbled to dust, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: “This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”³⁵

Asubha-bhāvanā or meditation on the foulness of the body as observed in decaying corpses is one of two forms of death meditation strongly advocated by Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*. This direct encounter with the bodily reality of death was essential for arriving at the insight that there is no inherent or enduring “self” the body otherwise experiences as “I” or “Mine.”³⁶ Just as a butcher who has slaughtered and cut up a cow to sell no longer thinks, after the slaughter, in terms of “cow,” but only in terms of “meat,” so too, says Buddhaghosa, should a similar shift in cognition take place in the meditator.³⁷

We know from the time of the Buddha corpses were commonly left out in the open where they either decayed or were devoured by wild animals. These sites were a testament to both the repulsive nature of the body as it underwent the various stages of putrefaction and the fact that death is the inescapable destiny of all living beings. As such, the Buddha regarded them as ideal settings for contemplating the body. In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa informs us that when the meditator hears people saying “that at some village gate or on some road or at some forest’s edge or at the base of some rock or at the root of some tree or on some charnel group a bloated corpse is lying” the meditator, should go “with no companion . . . taking a walking stick or a staff to keep off attacks by dogs . . .” to test his control of the mind and develop his practice of meditation.³⁸ He then describes in graphic detail ten distinct stages of decomposition including: The *bloated* which is characterized by “gradual dilation and swelling . . . as a bellows in with wind”; the *livid* or “patchy discoloration” of a corpse “that is reddish-colored in places where flesh is prominent, whitish-colored in places where pus has collected, but mostly blue-black”; what is “trickling with pus in broken places” is labeled *festering*; the *cut-up* describes what has been opened up or cut in two; the *gnawed* refers to what has been chewed in various ways by animals; the *scattered* draws attention to body parts strewn about; the *backed and scattered* refers to a body in which the limbs have been cut in a “crow’s-foot pattern”; the *bleeding* focuses on “where blood sprinkles here and trickles there”; the *worm-infested* refers to the infestation of maggots

that ripple throughout the body; and the *skeleton* focuses attention on a particular bone or the entire frame of the body.³⁹

The first elaboration on the Buddha’s instructions for corpse meditation is found in a manual of practical instruction known as the *Vimuttimaggā* (*Path of Freedom*), a text whose authorship is ascribed to the Elder Arahant Upatissa, a monk believed to have lived in first century Ceylon.⁴⁰ According to Upatissa, one who practices mindfulness of death is “not stingy . . . does not cling to things, is endowed with the perception of impermanence . . . and the perception of not-self.” Furthermore, when the time of death does come, the person who has diligently practiced mindfulness of death does not “suffer bewilderment.”⁴¹ He also notes that the successful meditator hoards neither clothes nor ornaments, an observation which reminds us that this was a practice undertaken not only by monastics but was deemed by the Buddha to be an ideal exercise for the lay meditator as well.⁴²

It was, however, and continues to be, an essential form of practice for monks who have a long tradition of utilizing death meditation as a means for directly confronting and overcoming fear — both fear of the dead and fear of the malevolent spirits often associated with the dead — while cultivating equanimity of the senses and developing a new relationship to the body and to the self. During the late nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, Ajahn Mun, a monk widely revered for having revived and popularized the *dhutanga kammattḥāna* or wandering ascetic meditator monk tradition in the forests of Northeast Thailand, often encouraged his disciples to stay in charnel grounds when passing through a village. Following Buddhaghosa, Mun believed that monks and lay people alike should visit cemeteries to remind themselves that they live in the shadow of birth, aging, sickness, and death and are all, even now, “in the process of dying, little by little, every moment of every day.” He described visiting a cemetery where cremations are performed and the value of reflecting inwardly on the crowded cemetery within one’s self “where untold numbers of corpses are brought for burial all the time: such a profusion of old and new corpses are buried within [our] bodies that it’s impossible to count them all.”⁴³ Ajahn Mahā Boowa, Mun’s biographer and disciple, amplified this idea further by referring to the kitchen as a crematorium for animals and the stomach as a graveyard.⁴⁴ This idea that one’s own living body is itself a burial site for the dead has its *locus classicus* in the *Visuddhimagga* where Buddhaghosa directs the meditator to reflect on “sharing the body with many”:

Firstly, it is shared by the eighty families of worms. There too, creatures live in dependence on the outer skin, feeding on the outer skin; creatures live in dependence on the inner skin, feeding on the inner skin; creatures live in dependence on the flesh, feeding on the flesh, [etc.] . . . And there they are born, grow old, and die, evacuate, and make water; and the body is their maternity home, their hospital, their charnel ground, their privy and their urinal.⁴⁵

As with the basic meditation on the unattractive parts of the body given during one’s ordination, the mindfulness of death meditation (*maraṇasati*) encouraged sustained

reflection on “sharing the body with many” to underscore the discomforting fact that one’s own body literally and inescapably embodies death. Meditating in a cemetery or charnel ground brought this fact home in dramatic fashion. If the living body could serve as such a powerful site for arousing humiliation and disgust, then the dead body, the body as corpse, magnified this aversion by striking terror into the heart of the meditator. A well-known disciple of Mun’s, Luang Por Chah (Ajahn Chah), vividly describes what happened when he was led to a charnel ground for the first time. The villagers carried in a corpse and cremated the body directly in front of his *klot* so he could contemplate the burning carcass.⁴⁶ But after the villagers left he was tormented and paralyzed with fear. Here is the passage:

The fire had burned right down. The embers were red, green, blue. They spluttered and every now and again broke into flame. Suddenly I heard a sound from behind me . . . I thought that maybe the corpse had rolled off the fire. . . . But no it wasn’t that. . . . Then came the sound of someone moving ponderously through the forest . . . towards me . . . I was sure the end had come. My whole body was petrified with terror. I forgot Buddho, Dhammo, Sangho, everything. All that existed was the fear; I was as stretched and tight as a monastery drum . . . I asked myself “What are you afraid of? Why are you so terrified?” I didn’t actually say that, the question arose spontaneously in my mind and the answer arose in response: “I’m afraid of death.” That’s what it said. So I asked further “Where is death?” . . . I kept asking where death was until finally I got the answer: death lies within us. “If that’s the case then where can you run to, to escape from it? If you run away it will run with you. If you sit down, it will sit with you. If you get up and walk off it will walk with you, because death lies within us. . . .” These reflections cut off my thoughts . . . I felt great amazement that such fearlessness could arise right in the very same place that strong fear had been just a few moments before. My heart soared to the heavens.⁴⁷

What we have here is a dramatic account of dying before dying rooted in a dialogue, not with death, but with the self in the face of death, or rather, against inauthentic notions of what constitutes the self in relation to certain ideas about death. Significantly, Ajahn Chah does not set-out or intend to “have” an experience of “dying” to death; rather, like the dialogue itself, it arises spontaneously. Nor is this a case of someone having an imaginary conversation with his self: he is confronting an imaginary world which his fears have conjured and is quelling it by asking repeatedly: “Where is death?” The response he “receives” is not a denial of death or the fear he is experiencing. Both are real. What he discovers when the bogeyman is at last unmasked is a profound truth: “death lies within us.” The shift in the use of pronouns is significant: the “I” that hears a sound of someone moving ponderously through the forest, the “I” that imagines a corpse rolling off the pyre, the “me” that is so petrified with terror it forgets to take refuge in “Buddho, Dhammo, Sangho,” the first person “I” for whom the end has surely come, eventually gives way through dialogue to the second person “you” that walks and sits with death, a death which lies within all of “us.” If the death that comes at the end of life

is the death that separates us from one another, then the death that comes before death is the death that joins us to one another.

In the struggle with the terrors of finitude, to resist the powerful instinct to abandon one's practice, to gain control over the mind, to experience death not as a distant future event but as something already embodied in the process of living, is an activity that has been likened by some Buddhists to the work associated with obtaining a university education:

Lord Buddha was the first “professor” to teach [in a charnel ground]. . . . Buddhism developed and prospered and spread . . . because it relied upon the “university” of the charnel grounds . . . This has continued through the ages right down to us who are here now and who uphold them as the guiding line of our lives and hearts and practice the way following their example.⁴⁸

According to Ajahn Mun, to successfully calm the mind that wants to flee in horror is to return to the world with a courage and ability to “go anywhere, live anywhere and lie down anywhere without fear of death.”⁴⁹ Thus, the contemplation of death is not a strategy for renouncing the world but a possibility for arriving at a profound feeling of being more fully at home in the world; and this, from the likes of those who, like the Buddha, found it necessary to go forth from the home life into homelessness.

Towards a Comparative Framework

Go die, O man of honor, before you die
So that you will not suffer the pangs of death,
Die in such a way as to enter the abode of light,
Not the death that places you in the grave.

— *Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273)*

Is death something people can experience before they actually die? Common sense would say no, one can only experience death, if that is the right way of putting it, at the end of life. Yet, the injunction to “die before you die” appears to have common currency in a variety of religious and philosophical contexts. But why would someone want to or need to die before they die and what, precisely, is it that “dies” in the process? Both Islamic Sufism and Theravāda Buddhism address this question by calling special attention to the evanescence of human existence and by linking this recognition to a demand for spiritual progress, not as a means of forestalling death, but to transmute the power of its reality into what is held to be a higher, more pure or virtuous life, a life rendered fearless in the face of finitude. To achieve this, anyone and everyone — from the ordinary lay person to the religious virtuoso — is encouraged to take up a practice consisting of various exercises aimed at directing attention toward a sustained recollection or remembrance of death. This, as we have seen, is not conceived as an occasional practice nor is it one that is thought to be peripheral to the normative obligations one is otherwise expected to perform; rather, it is an ascetical activity that occupies a central place in the spiritual life.

In Islam death (*mawt*) may seem like the end of life but, in fact, it is only the end of the appointed period (*ajal*) in which human beings are being tested. Life comes about through the blowing of God's spirit (*rūḥ*) into the human body and departs at the moment of physical death. God is therefore both the author and source of human birth and death. The question as to what constitutes the "self" that must "die" even as one lives, finds its equivalent in the complex, if imprecise term, *nafs*. Al-Ghazālī's use of this term distinguishes between the two aspects: the lower *nafs* which designates "that entity in man in which the power of anger and the power of desire are found" (the so-called "blameworthy qualities" in a person), and the higher *nafs* or "subtle entity . . . that is man's true reality, soul, and essence."⁵⁰ It is the lower *nafs*, that is, the more carnal, appetitive, egoistic aspect of the self, that has the potential to be trained, transformed, and ultimately annihilated (*fanā'*) through the constant remembrance (*dhikr*) of death and God. In the act of dying before dying, the "self" that "dies" is the self that identifies exclusively with the lower *nafs*. What lives, or rather subsists (*baqā'*), after "dying" is what Ghazālī calls the "higher" *nafs*: the person who has entrusted his life to God who neither fears death nor prefers life, but "by virtue of profound love and loyalty [has] arrived at the station of absolute surrender and contentment."⁵¹

In Theravāda Buddhism, death (*maraṇa*) is understood simply as the "interruption of the life faculty included within [the limits of] a single becoming (existence)." Buddhism distinguishes between two types of death: timely and untimely. A death determined by the "exhaustion of merit or the exhaustion of the life span" is considered a timely death whereas a death determined by "*kamma* (Skt. *karma*) that interrupts [other, life-producing] *kamma*" is regarded as an untimely death.⁵² Human birth and death are, like all other phenomena, subjected to an impersonal principal of causation known as *paṭicca-samuppāda*, "dependent origination." Buddhism regards the idea of a permanent soul or *atta* (Skt. *ātman*) as a mental projection which has no corresponding reality and, as such, is dangerous for it leads to false notions of "me" and "mine." The view that the self has an inner essence or eternal soul is nurtured on what are called the "three poisons" — greed, hatred, and delusion, around which the wheel of birth and death (*samsāra*) turns. According to the Buddha's analysis what, by convention, is called the "self" is, in fact, constituted by the congeries of five aggregates or *khandhas* (matter, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) which, in relation to *paṭicca-samuppāda* or the law of cause and effect, are inherently impermanent. This explains why corpse meditation has long been, and continues to be, a practice vital to Buddhism: "For all its grave stillness there is nothing more dynamic than a corpse."⁵³ It is the event of impermanence taking place before the eyes of the meditator. The corpse therefore serves as the ideal object lesson: to "die" before you die is to die to false notions of an enduring self.

In spite of these two radically different perspectives both Islam and Buddhism agree that the central human predicament is not death but the unsatisfactoriness that results from our identification with a self that hankers for the things of this world. According to al-Ghazālī the cause of this dissatisfaction is rooted in ignorance due to: (1) lengthy

hopes and (2) desire for the things of this world. By lengthy hopes he means we generally go about our lives under the pretext that we can expect to enjoy a long and healthy life. To maintain this fantasy, we plunge ourselves into the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, and prestige and, in the process, become so “engrossed” we fail to recognize how brief and ephemeral these frivolities are in actuality. The Buddha offered an analogous perspective. The term he designated for the unsatisfactoriness of life is *dukkha* or suffering and it conveys a similar notion in that its cause is attributed to a thirsting or craving (*tanha*) for sense pleasures that ultimately entrap us in the rounds of birth and death. And, as in Sufism, it is the failure to penetrate the veil of ignorance (*avijjā*) that keeps us from knowing the true nature of the self.

Whether it is a question of gaining insight into the insubstantial nature of the “self” (*anatta*), as in the case of the Buddhism, or, a need to effect a decisive break with that aspect of the “self” (*nafs*) “engrossed” in worldly affairs and lengthy hopes as we find in Sufism, what is apparent in both traditions is that the experience of dying before dying seems to introduce two new forms of experience which were previously absent. The first — that of introspection — appears to be linked to a new knowledge of how one/I/you/we should live our lives while the other is primarily one of interrogation — the minute level of scrutiny required of one who goes to battle with his own demons. This occurs at the very moment in al-Ghazālī’s spiritual biography when, for the first time, he conducts an examination of his motives for teaching and it culminates in the anxiety attack that robs him of the ability to speak in the lecture hall. In the case of Ajahn Chah this process of introspection and interrogation takes the form of an internal dialogue, one that is not willed but arises spontaneously at the moment he is seized with terror to the point of paralysis and is forced to confront the basis for his fears of death. In both cases, and this is significant, each man temporarily loses the ability to control his external voice and, in the process, gains a new possibility for giving space over in his life to the authority of an interior voice. Thus, to access this new field of experience one must be willing to submit to a practice of “dying” to those aspects of the self that otherwise stand in the way of spiritual development.

There is also the possibility that an intimate knowledge of death and dying may, in fact, be an important vector through which notions of the ethical life are transmitted within the boundaries and parameters of a given tradition. If this is the case, if dying before dying contributes to the formation of oneself as an ethical subject, if it is generative of experiencing or imagining a new sense subjectivity, or at least new possibilities for reforming the old sense of self, then it appears to be a process of identity formation that is both morally compelling and expansive. By “dying” one rehearses, as it were, a role inscribed in the narrative ethics transmitted and performed by countless virtuosi through the ages. We saw how the ordination procedure of a new monk, together with his first instruction in meditation, reenacts the Buddha’s response to his own confrontation with death by choosing to go forth with the Great Renunciation. Al-Ghazālī’s ethical interiorization begins with his recognition that God, through the call of the inner voice beckoning him to take to the road, compelled him to renounce (i.e.,

“die”) to his attachment to a comfortable teaching post in what was then one of the most prestigious centers of learning in the world. New research into his life suggests this decision to turn away from the comforts of worldly life toward a life of “seclusion” (*uzla*) may also have been prompted by reports about the life of the Prophet Muḥammad and about al-Ash‘arī, who, like other figures of Islam, had a life-changing experience at the age of forty.⁵⁴ Because turning one’s life around at age forty is a recurring motif in Muslim biographies, if true, this would confirm that his decision to abandon his teaching post and embrace a mystical path of seclusion can also be understood in terms of Flood’s idea of asceticism, that is, as the “internalizing of tradition” and the shaping of the narrative of one’s life in accordance with the narrative of tradition.⁵⁵

If, as the phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) once observed, religion implies that we do not simply accept the life that is given to us, then it must also be true of religion that neither do we simply accept the death that comes to claim that life.⁵⁶ This refusal to accept life as given, that something more is required of us in anticipation of death, features prominently in the two religions we have examined here: Islamic Sufism and Theravāda Buddhism. After examining al-Ghazālī’s exercises for instilling a “remembrance of death” alongside the Buddha’s practices for cultivating a “mindfulness of death,” I would like to conclude by making the following comparative argument: the imperative to “die before you die,” along with the various exercises aimed at actualizing this possibility may, in fact, be seen as a specific spiritual technology human beings have utilized throughout the ages, and across a variety of cultural and religious contexts, as a means for understanding, defining, experiencing, and, ultimately, transforming the self in relation to the dominant culture that otherwise shapes one’s personal and social identity. This injunction to “die before you die” may therefore be indicative of a broader, perhaps even universal, impulse in the spiritual and philosophical traditions of the world and, as such, calls for greater analytical attention across the widest possible range of religious and ascetical cultures.

Endnotes

1. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment, Vol. One: The Lamrim Chenmo*. Joshua W. C. Cutler, Editor-in-Chief, Guy Newland, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2000), 160.
2. *A Flower Does Not Talk: Zen Essays* by Zenkei Shibayama, 106.
3. This paper began as a conference presentation delivered at the American Academy of Religion’s annual meeting in Montréal, 9 November 2009. I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to John P. Keenan for presiding and Bradley S. Clough for convening the panel as well as my fellow panelists Jared Lindahl, Stuart W. Smithers, and Justin Whitaker. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Imtiaz Yusuf who attended that meeting and solicited this paper.
4. There is a rich body of literature concerned with the symbolism of death, such as e.g., Mircea Eliade’s *Birth and Rebirth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture*, trans. W. Trask (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958). However, it is the spiritual practices associated with dying to death and not the symbolism and ritual ceremonies of initiatory death that concern us here.
5. The dynamism of a deeply Hellenized Sogdian religiosity appears to have facilitated and accommodated some of the earliest encounters between Buddhists and Muslims in Central Asia. See

Mariko Namba Walter's "Sogdians and Buddhism," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, No. 174, Nov. 2006. Reynold A. Nicholson's entry on "Asceticism (Muslim)" for the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. II (1909), speculates on the contributions Buddhism made to the development of Sufi spiritual practices. His entry draws on Ignaz Goldziher's pioneering papers and lectures in Europe and America at the turn of the 19th century concerning the history and development of Sufism. These include evidence of the influence Buddhism had on Islamic ascetical culture and the literary imagination. See his *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (esp., 141–143). On the broad diffusion of the Buddha's legendary biography in Christian and Muslim literary traditions, see Ilia V. Abuladze's introduction to *The Balavariani* by David Marshall Lang (Berkeley & Los Angeles: UC Press, 1966). Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the 16th and 17th century Chinese Muslim literati who read Islam as a polemic against Buddhism and Taoism. Confucian Muslim scholars like Wang Tai-yü (c. 1592–1658) were among the first to compare the teachings of Islam with Buddhism as well as Confucianism and Taoism. See Sachiko Murata's *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (2000) but also Zvi Ben-Dor Benite's *The Dao of Muhammad* (2005). For an historical account documenting the positive interplay between Muslims and Buddhists in Tibet see *Islam in Tibet*, Gray Henry, ed. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1997). Thomas Cleary has identified metaphysical and methodological affinities between Islam and Mahayana Buddhism in his 1982 conference paper, "Buddhism and Islam" published in *Transactions of the International Conference of Orientalists in Japan*, Issue 27, 31–38. On their historical encounter and the need for an interreligious perspective, see David Scott's "Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters and Interfaith Lessons" in *Numen*, vol. 42, 1995, 141–151.

6. On the new studies in asceticism, see *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* by Geoffrey Harpham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *Asceticism*, Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and *Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts and Comparative Perspectives*, Oliver Freiberger, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, David Shulman and Guy Stroumsa, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

7. See Gavin Flood's *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* by Richard Valantasis (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008).

8. *The Ascetic Self*, ix and *The Making of the Self*, 103.

9. From a sermon cited by al-Ghazālī in his *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, T. J. Winter, trans. (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 20. Cited hereafter as *Remembrance*.

10. Through close attention to his life and teachings, Frank Griffel attributes to al-Ghazālī the naturalization of *falsafa* within the Islamic theological discourse. See his *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

11. Available in English as Book One in *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī*, W. Montgomery Watt, trans. (Oxford: Oneworld, [1953] 2000). Hereafter *Faith and Practice*.

12. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

13. He was apparently the victim of a voice disorder known today as psychogenic aphonia in which the inability to speak is due to anxiety, depression, or a personality disorder. See Baker, Janet. "Psychogenic Voice Disorders and Traumatic Stress Experience." *Journal of Voice*, 17:3, 2003, 308–318.

14. *Faith and Practice*, 145.

15. *Ibid.*, 63.

16. *Ibid.*, 127–128.

17. *Ibid.*, 130, 129.

18. *Remembrance*, 12.

19. *Ibid.*, 118.

20. *Ibid.*, 13.

21. *Faith and Practice*, 57.

22. *Remembrance*, 27.

23. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

24. *Encyclopedia of Canonical Hadīth*, G. H. A. Juynboll, ed. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 201.
25. *Remembrance*, 28.
26. *Faith and Practice*, 122–124.
27. *Remembrance*, 119.
28. *Ibid*, 11.
29. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, *The Life of the Buddha* (Seattle, WA: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 2001), 9–10.
30. Apparently, the robes of a *bhikkhu* overtly conveyed at one time this dual symbolism of death/rebirth. According to Buddhaghosa, two possible sources for acquiring the fabric used for fashioning a *bhikkhu*'s robes were from a charnel ground or from discarded cloth used in wiping up the stains of childbirth. See Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, trans., (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Body Educational Foundation, [1956] 2001), (II, 16). Cited hereafter as *Visuddhimagga*.
31. George D. Bond, "Theravada Buddhism's Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death" in *History of Religions*, 19:3 (1980), 237–258.
32. Ven. Acharn Mahā Boowa Ñānasampanno, *Paṭipadā or The Mode of Practice of Venerable Acharn Man*, Paññāvaḍḍho Bhikkhu, trans. (Udon Thani, Thailand: Wat Pa Baan Taad, 1997), 13.
33. *Visuddhimagga*, (VIII, 85).
34. Cited in Liz Wilson's *Charming Cadavers* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 47.
35. *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikāya)*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, ed. and rev. by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 148–149.
36. *Visuddhimagga*, (XX, 93).
37. *Visuddhimagga*, (XI, 31).
38. *Visuddhimagga* (VI, 12–23).
39. *Visuddhimagga*, (VI, 1–11).
40. Arahant Upatissa, *The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimagga)*, The Rev. N. R. M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera, trans. (Colombo: The Saman Press, 1961). Hereafter *Vimuttimagga*. Although the original text, presumed to have been written in Pāli, no longer exists, it survived in a Chinese translation of the 6th century. An English translation by Soma Thera and Kheminda Thera was published in Ceylon in 1961. Although Buddhaghosa makes no mention of it, and the style and lengths of these two texts differ considerably, Bhikkhu Ñānamoli puts its composition sometime before the *Visuddhimagga*, possibly in India. See his introduction to the *Visuddhimagga*, *op. cit.*, xxvii–xxviii.
41. *Vimuttimagga*, 166.
42. Neither monks (Pāli *Vinaya II* 106) nor nuns (Pāli *Vinaya IV* 338–340) were allowed to wear ornaments. Robes, not clothes, were permitted.
43. Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñānasampanno, *Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera: A Spiritual Biography*, Bhikkhu Dick Silaratano (Udon Thani, Thailand: Wat Pa Baan Taad, 2003), 66.
44. *Ibid.*, 464, see endnote 10.
45. *Visuddhimagga*, (VIII, 25).
46. A *klot* is a large umbrella equipped with a mosquito net used for meditation or as a tent outdoors.
47. The passage cited from Luang Por Chah's biography is available online through Abhayagiri Monastery at: www.abhayagiri.org/.../Luang_Por_Cha_bio_Aj_Jayasaro_May_2007.pdf. See 38–39. A slightly different translation of this account was published in Ajahn Chah's *Food for the Heart* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2002), 257–260.
48. Mahā Boowa Ñānasampanno, *Paṭipadā or The Mode of Practice of Venerable Acharn Mun* (Udon Thani, Thailand: Wat Pa Baan Taad, 1997), 231–232.
49. *Ibid.*, 228.
50. Cited in Sara Sviri's "The Self and Its Transformation in Śūfism" in *Self and Self-Transformation in the History of Religions*, Shulman and Stroumsa, eds., *op. cit.*, 195.

51. *Remembrance, op cit.*, 8.
52. *Visuddhimagga*, (VIII,1).
53. Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 92.
54. Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology, op. cit.*, 42.
55. Gavin Flood, *op. cit.*
56. See his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1967).

Yogic-Şūfī Homologies: The Case of the “Six Principles” Yoga of Nāropa and the Kubrawiyya

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“Don’t look for an outer place of solitude;
The body itself is a divine mansion (*maṇḍala*).
Don’t look elsewhere for the deity;
The mind itself, unborn and unperishing,
Is the family Buddha and guru.”

Siddharājñī

“However much the angels examined the form of Adam, they were unable to discover the compendium of mysteries that he in truth was.”

Najm al-Dīn Dāya al-Rāzī

Yoga, in Eliade’s definition, is “the effectual techniques for gaining liberation,”¹ i.e., liberation from illusion (Sansk., *māyā*, Tib., *sgyu mal*) and the great vortices of contingent existence (Sansk., *samsāra*, Tib., *‘khor-ba*). It is not immediately clear how such a model might relate to Islam, a religious system articulated in terms of the radical answerability of the creature to the Creator within a framework of sacred law (Arabic, *al-sharī‘a*). Yet insights might be gained from an heuristic suspension of the dichotomy of an Islamic paradigm of servanthood and an Indic one of liberation. Concepts of transcendental law arguably inform the Indic “liberation” traditions (whether Buddhist or Hindu), as expressed, for instance, in ideas like *dbarma* and the inexorable mechanisms of *karma*; equally, a concept of liberation informs the Islamic legal paradigm, as expressed, for instance, in the deep concern of Islamic ethics with personal and societal salvation (Arabic, *najāt*) — an individual and collective transfer to Paradise. In addition to framing yoga as a project of emancipation, Eliade defines it above in terms of methods or “effectual techniques,” and a yogic reading of Islam in such terms seems similarly fertile. Islam’s nomocratic model is not unrelated to *karma-yoga*, the yogic methodology based on righteous activity. Moreover, the Islamic *nomos* — the revealed codes of the *Sharī‘a* — itself emerges from the (so to speak) “yogic” praxis of the Prophet, such as his methods of prayer, fasting, vigil, seclusion, and his entry into visionary states. The law assumes these elements to the extent that they formed the

original matrix and instrumentality of its revelation. This leads to a historical duality, enshrined in the distinction of exoteric clergy (*‘ulamā’ al-zābir*) and esoteric clergy (*‘ulamā’ al-bāṭin*) — repositories of the two aspects of the Prophetic legacy. The *nomos* aspect was safeguarded and explored by the Muslim legists or exoteric clergy, while the “yogic” aspect was primarily safeguarded and explored by the Şūfīs or esoteric clergy.

Within the vastly complex Şūfī traditions in question, it is probably in the order (*ṭarīqa*) known as the Kubrawiyya that Şūfism’s yogic trend emerges most clearly. Though this was undoubtedly stimulated by certain historical factors, it is here argued that direct appropriation, importation, and textual transmission of teachings from non-Islamic sources had a merely marginal role in the Kubrawī phenomenon — against the diagnostic reflex of earlier European language scholarship in its project of exposing “origins,” and source-investigation. Of course, textual materials from the Buddhist and Hindu world did presently make their way into Arabic and Persian.² But this explanation seems as crude as it is tidy. Less clear-cut, but surely more decisive, was the cumulative impact of an internal, “organic” development of Islamic mysticism, through which there had been a gradual elaboration of relevant elements (e.g., ascetic and meditational techniques, analysis of visionary apperceptions, and thaumaturgy, in contrast with, say, purely ethical aspects). That the proximity of Indic yogic traditions, but also Turkish shamanistic and Iranian Mazdean cultures, predisposed eastern Şūfism to elaborate such features, while likely, should not be simply viewed as a process of “borrowing.” Rather, the challenge of these competing models perhaps provoked local Şūfī teachers to stress and explore these possibilities intrinsic to the Islamic tradition itself, possibilities rooted in the Qur’ān, early Muslim tradition, dimensions of the Prophet’s own spirituality, and in their own tested experience as Muslim mystics.

The stimulus to develop comparable *internal* virtualities intensifies after the triumph of the Mongols and in particular their Iranian branch, the Īl-Khāns. The Kubrawiyya’s formative milieu is the Īl-Khānid empire, in which, for the best part of the 13th–14th century CE (AH 7th–8th century), the Iranian regions witnessed an unprecedented intrusion of Buddhist scholars and practitioners (Persian, *bakhsbī*, pl. *bakhsbiyān*, from Sanskrit *bbikṣu*, “mendicant”) from centers to the east. There are, for example, records of inter-religious debates (Arabic, *munāzarāt*) held at the court of the Īl-Khān emperor, Arghūn (regnat AH 683–90/1284–1291 CE), who was strongly committed to Buddhism (designated *Shakmūniyya* in contemporary Arabic and Persian sources, i.e., the doctrine of Śākyamuni).³ These *bakhsbiyān* represented traditions we would now consider a Tibeto-Mongol form of Buddhism, but which in the period in question had not yet become extinct in its original Indian habitat. Though the major north Indian Buddhist universities of Nalanda and Vikramaśīla had been destroyed by Muḥammad b. Bakhtiyār al-Khaljī as early as 1203 CE, some *bakhsbiyān* close to the Īl-Khāns are known to have had connections with Indian centers of learning, such as a certain Bakhshī Parinda who had particular influence on Arghūn himself.⁴ This Parinda is on record as part of a monastic community in Somnāth on the Kāthiāwār coast of Gujerat.⁵

While Parinda was apparently respected by and even friendly with the great Kubrawī sheikh ‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336), the Kubrawiyya were far from universalistic (*a fortiori*, syncretistic) Ṣūfī currents and were instead staunch promoters of Islam’s claims to exclusive validity. This is borne out by the case of numerous Kubrawī masters: from the death in Khwārazm of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, the order’s very eponym and founder, fighting the pagan Mongol forces in 618/1221, to pronouncements by his disciple Najm al-Dīn Dāya al-Rāzī (d. 654/1256) in his *Mirṣād al-Ibād*, to denunciations of rival faiths by the aforementioned ‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī in texts like his *Chihil Majlis*, to the three missionary journeys of ‘Alī al-Hamadānī (d. 786/1384) to Kashmir, where he is credited with decisively establishing Islam against Hindu and Buddhist competition. These and many other examples emphasise for us that the extraordinary yogic affinities of the Kubrawiyya have little to do with intellectual porosity or any obvious “open-mindedness” within this *ṭarīqa* to the Indic yogic traditions confronting it. But the striking comparability of Kubrawī mysticism with the rich tradition of Tibetan yoga is not pure coincidence. As suggested, it was probably partly stimulated by Buddhist competition in the Īl-Khānid context, yielding forms of spirituality which, while deeply, indeed self-consciously, Islamic in their roots, were also unusually comparable with Buddhist yoga.

The tradition of Buddhist yoga which seems especially relevant to this comparison is articulated in terms of six sub-topics, six *dharmas* or principles (Tib., *chos drug*) — probably emerging from earlier Indian paradigms of “six-limbed yoga” (Sansk., *Ṣaḍāṅga-yoga*). The “six principles” yoga is in fact traditionally viewed as a legacy of the Indian *Mahāsiddhas* (“great adepts,” Tibetan, *grub chen*). It is in particular believed to have been derived from the Indian adept Tilopa (988–1069 CE), who had been the disciple of a female bodhisattva, the Bengali courtesan Barima. Tilopa next transmitted it to another Bengali with whose name the system is chiefly associated, Nāropa (1016–1100 CE), who passed it to the great Tibetan scholar of Sanskrit, Marpa Lotsawa (“the translator,” 1012–1097 CE). The latter would in due course become the teacher of the famous Tibetan sage Milarepa. A body of Tibetan works on “Nāropa’s six yogas” would grow over time, for example, “The Three Inspirations” by Tsongkhapa Chenpo (i.e., “the Great,” 1357–1419 CE).⁶ Using the Tibetan nomenclature, the six yogas are generally listed as: (1) *gtum mo* (literally “fierce lady”), the Tibetan equivalent of awakening the *kuṇḍalinī*, albeit with significant variations; (2) *sgyu lus* (illusory body yoga); (3) *rmi lam* (dream yoga); (4) *’od gsal* (clear light yoga); (5) *’pho ba* (consciousness transference); and (6) *bar do* (yoga of the “in between” state, i.e., death).

A strong affinity emerges in the very conceptual foundations of both this “six principles” yoga and Kubrawī Ṣūfism. The philosophical foundations of the former in part lie in the Yogācāra school, which with the Madhyamaka school constitutes one of the two great movements in Mahāyāna thought. For argument’s sake, let us propose the basic utility of viewing the “six principles” yoga system as, in certain specific ways, an *empirical* exploration of earlier Yogācāra philosophy.⁷ A good example of this is the

famous Yogācāra doctrine of the “three bodies” (*Trikāyavāda*). In historical context this emerged as a typology of buddhas, a “Buddhology,” co-ordinating historical buddhas (i.e., the *nirmāṇa-kāya*, or “conjured body”) and their unearthly equivalents (i.e., the *sambhoga-kāya*, or “bliss body”), as different epiphanies of ultimate reality (i.e., the *dharmakāya*, or “law body”), within a single whole. The centrality of the idea of the “body” (*kāya*) in this Buddhology is highly in tune with broader yogic forms of thought. The idea must nonetheless be stripped of its conventional somatic connotations of contingency and limitation, and *kāya* is significantly sometimes glossed in Yogācāra texts simply as “basis” or “support” (*āśraya*). In an expressive metaphor, the three bodies have also been presented as aspects of a limitless ocean and its entire, recursive system: “The *Dharma-Kāya* is symbolized — for all human word-concepts are inadequate to describe the Qualityless — as an infinite ocean, calm and without wave, whence arise mist-clouds and rainbow, which symbolize the *sambhoga-kāya*; and the clouds, enshrouded in the glory of the rainbow, condensing and falling as rain, symbolize the *Nirmāṇa-kāya*.”⁸

Next, when we shift to the Tantric context of the “six yogas,” this Yogācāra theory is typically transposed into the sphere of operative spirituality and the potential *experience* of the would-be adept. It becomes, in other words, a datum of Tantric empiricism. This is borne out by the Tibetan nomenclature, which speaks of “taking the three *kāyas* as the path” (*sku gsum lam 'khyer*). What is specifically involved is the technique of the “nine blendings” or mergings, central to the “six yogas.” In this method the yogin (Tibetan, *rnal 'byor pa*) achieves successive mergence (Tib., *sbyor*) with, i.e., realization of, the three bodies in his or her three primary states of waking, dream-sleep, and death ($3 \times 3 = 9$).⁹

The distinctively substantial and “somatic” character of this Yogācārin and Tantric discourse has a definite affinity with Kubrawī ways of thinking, throughout the Šūfī order’s history and its representative texts. In its general approach, cosmology *and* soteriology in effect become a kind of *somatology*. That is: both the map of the universe and the means of escape from it are conceptualised as deeply related to the form of the Šūfī’s body. In later, more speculative Kubrawī discourse, these relations are carried through in elaborate schemata, but even at the order’s inception, in the radically experience-based mysticism of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā himself, the trend is clear. The latter’s extraordinary analyses of visionary experience often focus on the presence within the Šūfī adept’s body of this or that “precious substance” (or “priceless jewel,” Arabic, *jawbar nafīs*). These substances have an on-going, existential link with their transcendental origins (or “mines,” Arabic, *mā'ādin*) with which they yearn to be completely reunited.¹⁰ In this perspective, salvation and mystical realization amount to the merging or re-union of the part with the whole (Arabic, *iṣāl al-juz'ī ila 'l-kull*).¹¹ The individual body of the mystic is a miniature epitome of the totality of reality and can thus become a supernatural organ for perceptual contact with that totality. In one astonishing, and typically mysterious, statement, Kubrā says: “The mystical traveller will similarly sense the generation of lights from the whole of his body and the veil

will possibly be withdrawn from the entire selfhood, so that *with all of the body you will see the All!*"¹²

This distinctive mysticism continues in Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī's *Mirṣād al-'Ibād* ("The Path of God's Servants"), a major Persian treatment of Kubrawī teachings which, in view of its last, fifth, section, even amounts to a blueprint for a wider sacred society. In this aspect of his book, Dāya discusses the different ways various social classes may maximize God-consciousness through their particular callings — whether royalty, politicians, merchants, farmers or artisans. Be that as it may, the somatic focus so typical of the Kubrawiyya is very clear in numerous earlier chapters of the text, such as: "The Creation of the Human Frame," "The Attachment of the Spirit to the Frame," "The Wise Purpose of the Attachment of the Spirit to the Frame," and "The Cultivation of the Human Frame."

Thus, the human form (*qālab-i insān*) is the vessel of the ultimate mysteries in Dāya's teaching, as he says: "However much the angels examined the form of Adam, they were unable to discover the compendium of mysteries that he in truth was (*na-mīdānistand ki īn cbi majmū'a-īst*)."¹³ In Dāya's characteristically Kubrawī approach, the exterior human form is a pathway to the transcendent and ultimately leads, through its successively interior cortices of the soul and the heart, into the unimaginably vast "realm of spirits" (*malakūt-i arwāḥ*). The outermost cortex of the frame is in turn the agent of acts in the world, be they righteous or evil. The ethical complexion of human behaviour can thus be analyzed by him in powerfully "yogic" terms. Good acts are the final issue of a trajectory which has led from the divine, to the spiritual world, to the human heart, to the psyche, to the physical body, and finally into the external world. Part of the function of virtuous actions is however to maintain the supernatural pathway through which they have travelled; they are thus in a sense *both* product and cause of the said pathway. For the gradual impact of their neglect and of performing bad deeds, is nothing less than the *obstruction* of the channel to the transcendent.

Dāya presents the dynamics of these processes in his chapter on "the Cultivation of the Human Frame," as if discussing the findings of an empirical investigation: "God Almighty has opened a path from the *malakūt* of spirits to the heart of His servant, laid down another path from the heart to the soul, and made a third path from the soul to the bodily frame. Thus every gracious aid that comes to the spirit from the world of the Unseen is passed on to the heart; then some part of it is given to the soul by the heart; and finally some trace of it is bestowed by the soul on the bodily frame, causing a suitable deed to appear there. If, conversely, some dark and carnal deed (*amalī zulmānī-yi naḥsānī*) should appear on the bodily frame, a trace of its darkness will affect the soul; then blackness will be transmitted from the soul to the heart; and finally a covering will come to the spirit from the heart, veiling its luminosity like a halo around the moon. Through this veiling, the path connecting the spirit to the world of the Unseen will become partially closed (*rāḥ-i rūḥ bi-'ālam-i gḥayb basta shud*), so that it will be unable fully to contemplate that world and the gracious aid that it receives will decrease."¹⁴

The “empirical” quality of the above partly lies in the way that Dāya formulates these processes in terms of the radiation and obscuration of light. In chapter 17, in the third part of the *Miršād*, he embarks on an involved discussion of the lights, or photic epiphanies, inwardly experienced by the Šūfī. The entire discussion gives expression to a defining feature of the Kubrawiyya: their cultivation, and close analysis, of visionary experiences of light. Najm al-Dīn Kubrā’s *Fawā’ih* directly prefigures this discussion of Dāya’s, and Simnānī will in due course carry the same analysis even further. Ultimately, it is God who is communicating *Himself* through this perceptible medium. As our author says: “The light that is derived from God’s lights and witnessed by the heart serves to make God known to the heart: He makes Himself known by means of Himself (*tārīf-i ḥāl-i kbud ham bi-kbud kunad*).”¹⁵ God has here entered into the scope of the Šūfī’s perception, albeit outside any prior norms of sensory perception. Dāya in fact states that forms, loci and colorations of these mystical lights “derive from the pollution of vision by the veils of the human attributes. When the lights are seen by pure spirituality, none of these attributes remains, and a colourless and formless radiance (*talā’ lu’ī bī-rang wa šakl*) becomes visible.”¹⁶

This statement has striking parallels in Tibetan teaching. The greatest divinity of Bön, the pre-Buddhist shamanism of Tibet, is called “the White Light” (*gShen lba ‘Od dkar*, pronounced *Shenlba Okar*). Recall, too, that one of Nāropa’s six yogas is designated “clear light yoga.” In addition, the “primal clear light” (Tibetan, *‘od gsal*) has a crucial role in the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” (*Bar do thos grol*, i.e., *Bardo Thödol*), the text par excellence of “*bardo* yoga,” the yoga pertaining to posthumous realities and to how the soul is to negotiate them. In the *chikhai bardo*, the first of the three afterlife states or *bardos*, the soul is said to be confronted by “the Clear Light of Reality, which is the Infallible Mind of the *Dharma-Kāya*.”¹⁷ The text states: “Thine own consciousness, shining, void, and inseparable from the Great Body of Radiance, hath no birth, nor death, and is the Immutable Light . . .”¹⁸ The deceased individual is presented with the opportunity to merge with this light and thus completely attain salvation from the revolutions of *samsāric* existence, though this is rarely possible, in which case the individual withdraws into experiences of subordinate, coloured lights such as the dull bluish-yellow light of the human world.¹⁹

The pointed concern of Tibetan spirituality in general, and Nāropa’s yogas in particular, with mystical cognitions of light, is one of its greatest similarities with the Kubrawiyya. The concern with photism seems distinct from the wider, essentially tropological, interest in light that is found in much mystical discourse, and has been noted by eminent modern scholars of both traditions. Thus Tucci declared of the former: “In the entire course of the religious experience of Tibetan man, in all of its manifestations from Bön religion to Buddhism, a common fundamental trait is evident; photism, the great importance attached to light, whether as a generative principle, as a symbol of supreme reality, or *as a visible, perceptible manifestation of that reality*; light from which all comes forth and which is present within ourselves.”²⁰ On the other hand, Corbin has proposed that the Kubrawiyya’s heightened interest in inner light and its

actual experience, amounted to a specific departure in the history of Sufism: “It seems that Najmoddīn Kobrā was the first of the Ṣūfī masters to focus his attention on the phenomena of colours, the coloured photisms that the mystic can perceive in the course of his spiritual states. He took great pains to describe these coloured lights and to interpret them as signs revealing the mystic’s state and degree of spiritual progress . . . This is not to say that [the Kubrawiyya’s] predecessors were unfamiliar with visionary experiences. Far from it. But the anonymous short work of a shaykh (which must have been written later than Semnānī, since it refers to him by name) bears witness to an ‘orthodox’ teacher’s alarm at what seemed to him an innovation.”²¹

The emphatically perceptual (especially photic) character of the mysticism found in both Tibetan yoga and the Kubrawiyya, complements a basic philosophical premise common to both, and neither tradition can be understood in the absence of the framework in question. Namely, a premise of *idealism* frees both systems to approach the transcendent as substantial in this way, and to treat it as an experience or “percept.” It is precisely their shared assumption of the primacy of consciousness which allows them to approach transcendental and ultimate reality in this daring manner, *without* thereby reducing it to the material. For them, there simply *is* no objective materiality — only forms of consciousness. Everything is a consciousness event, inseparable from mind and characterized by interiority.

Thus, as mentioned earlier, Tibetan yoga has discernible roots in the major Mahāyāna philosophical orientation known as Yogācāra. The latter is above all distinguished by its emphasis on the primacy of consciousness, and is sometimes also known as the Consciousness School (Sansk., *Vijñānavāda*) or “Consciousness-only School” (Sansk., *Cittamātrā*, Tib., *sems tsam pa*). Perhaps the most characteristic of all its teachings is that of the presence of some sort of ultimate noetic ground, generally referred to as *Ālaya-Vijñāna*, “storehouse consciousness.” It is true that earlier Western comparisons of Yogācārin teaching with European idealism have now been criticized on various grounds.²² Some scholars, however, still insist on the validity and explanatory value of this parallel.²³ The comparison’s validity partly depends on whether it is based on the “orthodox” Yogācāra of Sthiramati (d. 570 CE) or the “unorthodox” Yogācāra of Dharmapāla (d. 561 CE). The former insists on the fundamental emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of both external objects *and* consciousness — the teaching of non-substantive consciousness (*nirākāra-vijñāna-vāda*).²⁴ The latter however advocates a doctrine of substantive, or “real” consciousness (*sākāra-vijñāna-vāda*). Mind is here viewed as the positive ground of all “external” events and the data of experience — an interpretation which lends itself to comparison with certain types of idealism, which has a long history in European thought.²⁵

At any rate, that some variety of idealism is assumed in Tibetan yoga seems clear in its representative texts (I focus here especially on the *Bardo Thödol*). When the individual is confronted by the welter of visionary events in the second realm of death, the so-called *chönyid bardo*, the *Thödol* advises that the following verse be repeated to oneself:

“. . . May I recognize whatever [visions] appear, as the reflections of mine own consciousness;
 May I know them to be of the nature of apparitions in the *Bardo*:
 When at this all-important moment [of opportunity] of achieving a great end,
 May I not fear the bands of Peaceful and Wrathful [deities], mine own thought-forms.”²⁶

In fact, the *Thödol* states that the very key to transcending *saṃsāric* existence is to realize that all such experiences are internal, and are inseparable from mind: “O nobly-born, if though dost not now recognize thine own thought-forms, whatever of meditation or of devotion thou mayst have performed while in the human world — if thou hast not met with this present teaching — the lights will daunt thee, the sounds will awe thee, and the rays will terrify thee. Shouldst thou not know this all-important key to the teachings, — not being able to recognize the sounds, lights, and rays, — thou wilt have to wander in the *Sangsāra*.”²⁷

Towards the end of the *Thödol*, the arrival of the soul’s judge, the Lord of Death or Yama-Rāja (Tib., *‘chi-bdag*) is described. Although an awesome, indeed terrifying, being, he is in reality an epiphany of none other than the boundlessly compassionate Avalokiteśvara (Tib., *spyan ras gzigs*, i.e., “Chenrezig”). In his cross-questioning of the dead individual about his or her deeds in life, Yama-Rāja has recourse to a supernatural technology which the text calls the Mirror of Karma “Wherein every good and evil act is vividly reflected. Lying will be of no avail.”²⁸ Islamic tradition of course also describes the unfaltering accuracy of the moral record with which the deceased is confronted. But the particular correspondence of the “veridical reflector” mentioned in the Tibetan account with the episode now generally termed the “life review” reported by countless modern survivors of clinical death, is intriguing. Be that as it may, the *Thödol* still insists: “Apart from one’s own hallucinations, in reality there are no such things existing outside oneself as Lord of Death, or god, or demon, or the Bull-headed Spirit of Death. Act so as to recognize this.”²⁹ This “idealism” is thus the recurring refrain of the *Thödol*, and even in its closing stages it recommends the following meditation in the last of the death-realms mentioned, the *sidpa bardo*: “Lo! All substances are mine own mind; and this mind is vacuousness, is unborn, and unceasing.”³⁰

The Kubrawī masters advocate a remarkably similar idealism, starting with their founder, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā. The latter’s *Fawā’ih* is replete with accounts of overwhelming visionary experiences, yet states in one passage, without equivocation: “Know that the soul, the devil, and the angel are not things external to you (*laysat ashyā’ a kbārijatan ‘anka*), but you are them (*bal anta hum*). Likewise heaven, earth and the sedile (*al-kursī*) are not things external to you, and neither is the garden of paradise, hellfire, death and life. They are simply things within you (*innamā hiya ashyā’u fika*), and if you travel spiritually and become pure, you will see that clearly, God willing.”³¹ This explicit idealism — unusual in an Islamic context — recurs in a variety of ways in the texts of Kubrā’s spiritual progeny. Najm al-Dīn Dāya in the *Mirṣād* presents the same basic point of view in a number of passages. For instance, in the third part of the work,

in chapter 18, Dāya discusses “Unveiling and its Varieties.” This is a major discussion of the mystical application of the multifaceted Islamic concept of veiling. For Dāya, the entire constitution of greater reality is an ordered series of veils, in accordance with the prophetic saying (*ḥadīth*): “God has seventy thousand veils of light and darkness. If He were to draw them aside, the glories of His face would consume everything which beheld Him.”³² Dāya states that these veils or obstacles refer to nothing less than “all the different realms of this world and the hereafter,” but he immediately goes on to propose that they are in fact internal to the human being: “These seventy thousand realms exist in man’s own nature (*in baftād bazār’ālam dar nibād-i insān mawjūd ast*); he has an eye corresponding to each realm by means of which he beholds it, insofar as it is unveiled to him . . . Man consists in a union of these realms.”³³

Simnānī, for his part, expresses a similar viewpoint in one of his most distinctive re-interpretations of Ṣūfī principles. The venerable Ṣūfī (originally Hermetic and Neoplatonic) principle of the homology of the human being and the universe, the microcosm and the macrocosm, is captured in the formula: “The universe is a great human being and the human being is a little universe” (*al-kawnu insānun kabīrun wa’l-insānu kawnun ṣaghīrun*).³⁴ But Simnānī daringly inverts the structure of this relationship. For him it is not that the human being is a little world corresponding with, and contained by, the greater world outside, but the other way around. The human being is the greater world which contains the external universe — the outside is inside! As Jamal Elias expresses Simnānī’s inversion: “Although the physical realm appears to be larger than the spiritual one, the reverse is true. The physical world, with its visible and invisible dimensions, souls and horizons, and everything else that is with it, is a microcosmic human being, while the human being is a macrocosmic world. The spiritual realm, which is the world that lies within the body, is the macrocosm of the physical world, and the physical world, which appears to be larger than the body, is a microcosm.”³⁵ Simnānī’s perspective here is clearly a permutation of Kubrawī idealism, with external reality as content, and human consciousness as container.

Kubrawī Ṣūfism and Tibetan Yoga not only bear comparison in theoretical premises like these, but also in their actual spiritual practices. In particular, total isolation and special breathing techniques are emphasised in both. In one passage of his *Fawā’ih*, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā records in some detail his own, initially unsuccessful, entry into spiritual retreat (*al-khalwa*). He discovered through his own experiences that the success of this method (which he later describes as a spiritual “furnace,” *kūra*),³⁶ depends on one’s absolute resolution and on the thoroughness of one’s isolation. In the end, Kubrā’s *khalwa* only went well when he threw himself into it as if irreversibly, as a prefiguration of his own death: “I said: ‘At this very moment I am entering the grave, and will not be raised from it till Resurrection Day. This last bit of clothing is my shroud. So if thoughts of leaving my retreat gain ascendancy, I will rip the clothes from my body to shreds so as to be ashamed in front of people and not leave’. Thus my garment was the walls of my retreat-cell.”³⁷ In fact, he records that he only left his isolation when urged by his master. Najm al-Dīn Dāya, in the chapter on *khalwa* in his *Mirṣād*, emphasises the

need for complete darkness and sensory deprivation, and explains that this is the precondition for gaining admittance to the realm of “the unseen” (*ghayb*): “The room must be small and dark, with a curtain drawn over the door so that no light or sound penetrates. The senses will then cease functioning — seeing, hearing, speaking, and walking — and the spirit, no longer preoccupied with the senses and sensory phenomena, will direct itself to the world of the unseen. Moreover, once the senses have ceased functioning, the misfortunes that assail the spirit through the apertures of the five senses will be effaced by means of *zeker* [divine invocation] and the negation of stray thoughts. The veils that derive from the senses will fall; the spirit will gain familiarity with the unseen (*wa ān naw’-i ḥijāb nīz bi-nishīnad wa rūḥ-rā bā-ghayb uns padīd āyad*); and its familiarity with men will cease.”³⁸

Khalwa is thus pivotal in the Kubrawī method. As Dāya puts it: “Know that the foundation of wayfaring on the path of religion and of attaining the stations of certainty is seclusion, withdrawal, and isolation from men. All the prophets and saints devoted themselves to seclusion at the beginning of their state, and persisted in it until they reached their goal.”³⁹ The architecture of the Kubrawī convent (*kbānqāh*) seems to reflect the central role of *khalwa* in the order’s method. It is noteworthy that the important Kubrawī centre known as Ṣūfiyābad-i Khudādād, which was built by Simnānī in his hometown of Simnān in Iran, still stands — albeit minus its dome. A special, sealed chamber known as the “dark room” (*tārīk kbāna*), distinct in construction and location from the tiny dervish-cells below, is accessible by a stairway. It is windowless, and the entrance door, when closed, cannot even be detected from outside. The entire purpose of the environment is to isolate the resident completely from normal sensory in-puts. The intention here is virtually identical with that of the “dark retreats” of the Tibetan tradition, especially intended for yogic practices pertaining to inner light. In Tucci’s words: “The hermits of this school [*rNyīng ma pa*] have themselves enclosed in cells or caves into which not even the smallest ray of light can enter. Such caves for hermits are called ‘dark retreats’ (*mun mtsbams*). Their occupants perform a special type of yoga which equates the mind (*sems*) with light (*‘od gsal*) . . . They hope that through this practice the inner light will break forth from the mind which is of the same nature as it and illuminate everything with its shining radiance.”⁴⁰

Apart from isolation, the foundation of the yogic practice which Tucci mentions here is the technique of breath control known as “pot-shaped breathing” or “vase breathing” (Tib., *bum ba can*, Sansk., *kumbhaka*). This is described in elaborate detail in the relevant texts. The terminology refers to the shape, during breath-retention, of the yogin’s abdomen. Air which has been inhaled gradually through the nostrils, is compressed there and is visualised as filling the two side channels of the subtle body, *rasanā* (i.e., *piṅgalā*) and *lalanā* (i.e., *idā*). The procedure ends with the gathering of the vital breath from these channels, into the central, spinal channel (*avadhūti* or *suṣumnā*), the very “road to *nirvāṇa*.”⁴¹ The technique, which is combined with the visualisation of mantric syllables, is enjoined as the preliminary for the arousal of “inner heat” (Tib., *gtum mo*), and also for others of the six yogas. As one might expect, the

regulation of breathing (Persian, *habs-i dam*) is similarly vital to the spiritual disciplines of the Kubrawiyya. Simnānī, in particular, seems to have been responsible for modifying the invocatory technique of his teacher Nūr al-Dīn al-Isfarā'inī, to bring it in step with the rhythm of the systolic and diastolic phases of respiration. These rhythms are to be minutely controlled in conjunction with the various phonic elements of the Islamic testimony of faith (Arabic, *shahāda*), which is considered the ideal invocatory formula. As Elias recapitulates: "This formula [*lā ilāha illa 'llāh*, 'no god, but God'] should be uttered in four beats: (i) With all his strength, the mystic should exhale the *lā* from above the navel. (ii) He should then inhale the *ilāha* to the right side of the breast, (iii) then exhale the *illā* from the right side to the left, (iv) and then inhale the *Allāh* to the physical, pineal heart (*dil-i ṣanūbarī-i shakal*) which is on the left side of the breast. This causes the energy of the word *Allāh* to reach the heart and burn all desires contained therein. From this pineal heart, which is simply a piece of flesh and the abode of the animal spirit, a window is opened to the real mystical heart. From here the light of faith shines forth."⁴²

The reference to "the real mystical heart" in this passage is vital. It refers to the cardiac subtle center (*al-laṭīfa al-qalbiyya*) in the human chest. This is, in fact, one of a complex, sevenfold series of "subtle substances" or centers (*laṭā'if*) which Simnānī explores in his writings. There is no leeway here to enter into the details of this mystico-physiological scheme, which is probably the main historical legacy of the Kubrawiyya to Ṣūfī doctrine, especially in the orders of the eastern sector of Islam. The features of this extraordinary system have been presented by Corbin, Elias and others.⁴³ Simnānī's theory is a major step in the graduated historical development of the term *laṭīfa*, involving its ever greater elaboration and wider application. Najm al-Dīn Kubrā's works assume an older, simpler scheme of *laṭā'if* which is fourfold, namely, the heart (*al-laṭīfa al-qalbiyya*), the spirit (*al-laṭīfa al-ruḥiyya*), the intellect (*al-laṭīfa al-'aqliyya*), and the mysterium (*al-laṭīfa al-sirriyya*). In Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī's mysticism a fifth center, the arcanum (*al-laṭīfa al-khafiyya*), is presented. This is located between the eyes at the forehead. Two more centers are then employed in Simnani's teaching, namely, the lowest, basal center (*al-laṭīfa al-qālabiyya*) and the highest, cranial center (*al-laṭīfa al-ḥaqqiyya*, literally "the subtle substance pertaining to the Real," i.e., to God).

Each of these paranormal organs involves a photism of distinct color which is perceptible to the adept. Moreover, Simnānī co-ordinates each level with particular meta-cosmic realities from whose "emanations" they are in fact generated, and also with various human societies and categories. An example is the basal center which results from dominant emanations of the divine throne (*al-'arsb*), and is represented by human beings capable of speech but otherwise at a level close to animality.⁴⁴ Moreover, insofar as each center is identified with a given Qur'anic prophet in a chronological development from Adam to Muḥammad, both the Qur'ān and the sacred history to which it alludes can be interpreted employing the Simnānian system of *laṭā'if*.⁴⁵ In all this, the applications of the system are seen to be potentially inexhaustible in scope, taking in

occult physiology, cosmology, spiritual anthropology, sacred history, and scriptural hermeneutics. The system later becomes part of the teaching and methodology of orders like the Naqshbandiyya in the Indian Subcontinent, and is further expanded by figures like Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1625 CE) and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1762 CE) with his demandingly complex, three-tiered model with fifteen elements.⁴⁶

In its basics, this distinctive mystico-physiological system is strikingly close to what is found in the six yogas of Nāropa. Again, there is a gradual historical exploration of a core idea: that of the presence, and transformational potential, of various supernatural plexuses inherent in the human body. Rather like the pre-Simnānī system we find in Kubrā's texts, Tibetan yoga mainly uses an earlier, simpler, fourfold series of centers (*padma*, or *cakra*), which has yet to undergo expansion into the complex sevenfold system familiar in later Hindu Tantra. At the navel is located the "Wheel of Emanation," in the center of the chest is the "Wheel of Truth" or "Wheel of Phenomena," at the throat is "Wheel of Enjoyment," and at the crown of the head is the "Wheel of Great Bliss." But a further *cakra* is sometimes included at the genitals, called the "Wheel of the Preservation of Bliss," and even a series of four from the navel to the genitals.⁴⁷ In short, the basic elements of the classic, *cakra*-based physiological structure, are already referred to in Nāropa's six yogas: the right, left and central channels; the ganglia or "knots" (Sansk., *granthi*, Tib., *rtsa mdud*) where the side channels intersect periodically with the central channel; the *cakras* themselves, which are four or rather more in number; the association of various colors and shapes with each *cakra*, visualized as spoked wheels or lotuses with different numbers of petals; and the linkage of each to some particular mantric syllable.⁴⁸

A feature of the classic *cakra* system which is seemingly "notable by its absence" in Nāropa's six yogas — also in the Kubrawī system of *latā'if* — is the famous idea of a feminine, coiled, lightning-like energy (*kuṇḍalinī*). Though the imagery is already referred to in rather earlier Śaivite texts such as the 8th century CE *Śrī Tantrasadbhāva*, it remains mysteriously absent from Tibetan yoga. Where the Nāths and other Hindu yogins framed the process in terms of the awakening of this snakelike energy, then its ascent and trans-piercing of the *cakras* (*ṣaṭcakrabheda*), till it emerges through the "aperture of Brahma" (*brahmarandhra*) at the crown of the head, Nāropa and his commentators like Tsongkhapa, instead prefer to think of the process as a melting of the "bodhimind substance." Through visualizing the form of the subtle body, mantric syllables and persistence in vase-breathing, the said substance is melted within the various channels and is brought into the head. From the crown *cakra* is then aroused the first of four kinds of ecstasy, and so on, down through the other three main *cakras*.

Nevertheless, it is not hard to see the presence of *kuṇḍalinī*, despite the absence of the nomenclature, which suggests that these different mystico-physiological systems indeed articulate a similar or identical experience. The Tibetan terminology clearly refers to a volatile, feminine energy — the name for "inner heat" yoga (as mentioned earlier) being *gtum mo* ("fierce lady"), in turn translating the word *caṇḍālī*, from Sanskrit

√cand, “to be wrathful.” Details in the relevant texts also use images which are tantalizingly suggestive of *kunḍalinī*. They speak of an internal entity akin to a vertical stroke in Tibetan script (Tib., *a thung*, the “half Ah” or “short Ah”), situated four fingers below the navel, “in hair-like outline, floating, and half a finger in height, of reddish brown colour, hot to the touch, undulating and emitting like a cord moved by the wind the sound of ‘Phem! Phem!’”⁴⁹

Then through the appropriate visualisations and breathing exercises, the experience unfolds in steps, according to the same text, as follows, “. . . from the hair-like short-A[h], a flame of fire, half a finger in length and very sharp-pointed, flareth up. Think that the flame is endowed with the four characteristics, [of the median nerve as visualized, namely, perpendicularity, transparent brightness, redness, and vacuity]; and that it resembleth a revolving spindle. Think that with each such breathing the flame riseth up half a finger higher; and that by eight such breathings it reacheth the navel nerve-centre. With ten such breathings, all the petals of the psychic-nerve of the navel-centre will have been filled with psychic-fire. With ten more breathings, the fire moveth downward and filleth all the lower parts of the body, even to the ends of the toes. From there with ten more breathings, it burneth upward and filleth all the body up to the heart psychic-centre. With ten more breathings, the fire passeth up to the throat psychic-centre. With ten more breathings, it reacheth the crown of the head.”⁵⁰ Discussions like this one show quite forcefully that although the *kunḍalinī* is formally absent from the Tibetan six yogas system, it is substantially present. The entire description above gives expression to the idea of arousing a fulgurant, snakelike power in the adept’s abdomen, and then its ascent, through perseverance in breath-control, into higher and higher centers in the body.

What then of the Islamic analogue of this yoga, i.e., the mystico-physiological system of the *latā’if* employed by the Kubrawiyya and their successors? Pertaining as it does, to a religious universe quite distinct from that of these Indic models, we should not expect to find any parallel of *kunḍalinī* which is as conspicuous as the one above.⁵¹ Yet the formal, civilizational separation also heightens the significance of any comparable features. Even a relatively inexplicit parallel will demand attention and be disproportionately suggestive of a single, coherent body of experience underlying these discrete mystical traditions.

In drawing out a possible correspondence, the aforementioned Kubrawī “idealism” and emphasis of internality must be borne in mind. This relocates Kubrawī accounts of external, cosmic flights to God-realization, *within* the adept. Moreover, in some of these accounts, the soul itself (Arabic., *nafs*, literally “breath”) — the very *lebensgeist*, with its ambiguous passions and energies — is said to constitute the means of ascension. As such, the Ṣūfī’s soul is not infrequently equated with the quasi-animal upon which the Prophet Muḥammad journeyed through the layers of heaven to his encounter with the godhead in the paradigmatic event known as *al-Mi’rāj* (“the Ascension”). This entity, the very instrumentality of ascension and God-realization, is significantly referred to even in the earliest sources as *al-Burāq*, an obscure diminutive from the Arabic verb

√*ba-ra-qa*, “to shine” or “to flash” — the noun *barq* meaning “lightning.” The epithet could, in other words, be rendered as “the little lightning flash.” All this seems provocative in the present context.

In short, Kubrawī texts which speak of the process of realisation, drawing on that unsurpassable archetype of journeys to God in Islamic tradition, the Ascension of Muḥammad, read oddly like accounts of *kunḍalinī yoga*. The return of the spirit through higher and higher stages, to its own realm — a microcosmic reditus — cannot be brought about *without* the medium of this ambiguous, even chthonic, *lebensgeist*-energy, spoken of as the Ṣūfī’s own “little lightning flash” or *Burāq*. A good instance of this association of ideas is the following, from Dāya:

“The soul [*nafs*] will quit the station of commanding and come to that of tranquillity, and become a mount for the pure spirit. Traversing the stages and stopping places of the lower and higher worlds, *Borāq*-like (*Burāq ṣifat*) it will bear the spirit to the elevation of the Highest of the High, to the lofty degree of the distance of Two Bowstrings, and thus to become fit to receive the summons of ‘Return to thy Lord, well-pleased and well-pleasing [Qur’ān 89:28].’

This feeble and powerless one says:

Once bestial temper turns from thy soul
The bird of thy spirit returns to the nest.
The vulturelike spirit strives to ascend,
Alights on the king’s arm, and turns to a falcon.

The spirit, when returning to its proper world, has need of the *Borāq* of the soul, for it cannot go on foot. When it came to this world, it was mounted on the *Borāq* of the inhalation (*Burāq-i nafkha*): “and I inhaled in him of My spirit [Qur’ān 15:29].” Now, when it is to leave for the other world, it needs the *Borāq* of the soul to convey it to the [upper] extremity of the realm of the soul. The soul, in turn, has need of the two attributes of passion and anger in its journeying, for it cannot move either upward or downward without them . . .”⁵²

With Dāya’s involved reference here to the Prophet’s *Mi’rāj*, the discussion comes full circle: the prospect of an original “yogic” dimension to Islam. To repeat the idea with which we began: for historical reasons that include the stimulus of Buddhist competition, this on-going dimension comes to fullness in the Kubrawiyya, but has deep roots reaching back seven hundred years earlier to the spiritual life of the Prophet. The latter’s Ascension is of course an event of unique magnitude from the Muslim viewpoint. But in the context of this discussion and its main hypothesis, it stands out as a central example of a *topos* within the *Sīra* literature which is open to a radically “yogic” interpretation. By way of conclusion, a small but demonstrative sample of the relevant features of the Ascension narrative may be mentioned.

Statements traced to his young wife ‘Ā’isha indicate that some Muslims have consistently viewed the *Mi’rāj* event as spiritual, and not necessarily the corporeal flight envisioned by the mainstream tradition: “The apostle’s body remained where it was but

God removed his spirit by night.”⁵³ The role of the creature called al-Burāq in the sources, has already been noted. It is spoken of in the *Sīra* as having a face with partially human features, and is now often thought of, and depicted as, female. As if to confirm the power and volatility of its nature, traditional narrations state that the Prophet initially experienced difficulty in mounting al-Burāq but succeeded with the archangel Gabriel’s assistance.⁵⁴ In this, there may be some analogy with the notion of harnessing the *kuṇḍalinī*. The Prophet is next led up through a stepped series of levels, beyond the cosmos and into the divine presence — again suggesting the ascension by stages, of *kuṇḍalinī*. The now prevalent, later formulations of *Laya-Yoga* view *kuṇḍalinī* as rising through a seven-fold set of *cakras*, and the Prophet’s journey was also specified, from the earliest accounts, as mounting through seven levels of heavens, which indeed constitute the cosmology assumed by the Qur’ān. Muḥammad’s upward journey is moreover said to have involved the ascent of an extremely fine ladder which extends through a gateway. The ascent of this ladder is significantly identified in the sources as prefiguring the process of dying. As the Prophet himself is quoted: “. . . a ladder was brought to me finer than any I have ever seen. It was that to which the dying man looks when death approaches. My companion⁵⁵ mounted it with me until we came to one of the gates of heaven . . .”⁵⁶ Compare the idea, so central to the subtle physiology of yoga, of the aforementioned ultra-fine central pathway known as the *suṣumṇā* or in Buddhist equivalents as *avadhūtī* (Tib., *Uma-tsa*). To traverse this subtle pathway, the “gateway of Brahmā” (Sansk., *Brahmadvāra*) must also be passed through at its lower extremity.⁵⁷ The *Thödol* and other texts indeed state that this is the same route that is taken in death.⁵⁸

Fear of “parallelo-mania” prevents further pursuit of such echoes. But one particularly suggestive pronouncement by the Prophet concerning his *Mi’rāj* experience may be noted by way of completion. In transmitting contemporary discussions of how the *Mi’rāj* was a fully real event despite apparently occurring at the time of sleep, Ibn Ishāq quotes Muḥammad’s remarkable statement: “My eyes sleep while my heart is awake” (*tanāmu ‘aynāya wa qalbī yaqzān*).⁵⁹ The assertion is also found elsewhere in the *Sīra* as one of a series of responses by the Prophet Muḥammad to Jewish rabbis who were cross-questioning him: “[The rabbis said] ‘Tell us about your sleep.’ [The Prophet replied] ‘Do you not know that a sleep which you allege I do not have is when the eye sleeps but the heart is awake?’ [The rabbis replied] ‘Agreed.’ [The Prophet continued] ‘Thus is my sleep. My eye sleeps but my heart is awake.’”⁶⁰ Here, the state of “cardiac wakefulness” is crucially claimed by Muḥammad as his norm, and not just his mode of consciousness on the Night of the Ascension. There are in fact statements to the effect that such is the permanent consciousness of prophets in general.

These allusions are of great interest in the present context. The Prophet is, incidentally, quoting one of their own scriptures to the Jewish scholars — in fact one of the most exquisite and mystical Biblical texts of all, the Song of Songs (Hebrew, *Shīr ha-Shīrīm*). The words there are spoken by the beautiful Shulamite girl and refer to the heightened, in fact permanent, nature of her awareness of her royal lover: “I sleep, but

my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night . . .”⁶¹ By a transference of meaning, the Shulamite’s erotic longing refers to a prophet’s or realised mystic’s permanent consciousness of the divine presence, maintained even in the state of physical sleep. This perpetual awareness is also, of course, an ultimate goal of yoga (whether Hindu or Buddhist). A fundamental tripartite distinction is made in yogic discourse between the states of waking (*jāgrat*), dream-sleep (*svapna*), and deep sleep (*susupti*). Beyond these is the state of super-consciousness — the goal of the transformational disciplines of yoga — known as the “fourth” (*turiya*).⁶² Muḥammad’s statements about his permanent inward wakefulness, even in states of sleep, can thus be read as expressions of his realization of the *turiya*. The Tibetan Buddhist analogue of these ideas is found pre-eminently in dream-yoga (Tib., *rmi lam*) and its mastery, leading to the awareness of the primal clear light (Tib., *od gsal*) beyond either sleep or waking consciousness: “If one attain mastery of this process, then, whether in the sleeping-state or in the waking-state, one realizeth both states to be illusory; and all phenomena will be known to be born of the Clear Light, and phenomena and mind will blend.”⁶³

Endnotes

1. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Bollingen, 1990), 3.
2. A surprising number of Buddhist texts were already circulating in Arabic translations in the relevant period. Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh Hamadhānī in his famous *Jāmi’ al-Tawārīkh*, completed in 704/1305, states that eleven Buddhist works were available in translations in Iran, including various Mahayāna sutras. Texts pertaining to yoga, *sensu stricto*, are another matter. These seem to be mainly Hindu in background and only available to a Muslim readership from a much later period, under the Mughals and Safavids. A notable exception is the Arabic version of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* by al-Bīrūnī (d. 442/1050). See S. Pines and T. Gelblum, “Al-Bīrūnī’s Arabic Version of Patañjali’s Yogasūtra,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies [BSOAS]*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1966), 302–325; S. Pines, T. Gelblum, al-Bīrūnī and Patañjali, “Al-Bīrūnī’s Arabic Version of Patañjali’s Yogasūtra: A Translation of the Second Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts,” *BSOAS*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1977), 522–549; S. Pines, T. Gelblum, al-Bīrūnī and Patañjali, “Al-Bīrūnī’s Arabic Version of Patañjali’s Yogasūtra: A Translation of the Third Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts,” *BSOAS*, vol. 46, no. 2 (1983), 258–304; and S. Pines, T. Gelblum, al-Bīrūnī and Patañjali, “Al-Bīrūnī’s Arabic Version of Patañjali’s Yogasūtra: A Translation of the Fourth Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts,” *BSOAS*, vol. 52, no. 2 (1989), 265–305. In a series of articles, Carl Ernst has detailed the history of the availability of yoga traditions and texts to Sufis, most notably the “Pool of Nectar” (*Amṛtakunḍa*), replete with details of the practices of the Nāth yoga tradition in particular, including breath-control techniques. However, Ernst in fact rejects as a later fiction the account that it was first translated into Persian and Arabic as early as 1210 CE in Bengal by a certain Rukn al-Dīn al-Samarqandī and a scholar-yogin called Bhrgu. The version known as *Baḥr al-Hayāt* by Muḥammad Ghawth Gwāliyyārī (d. 1563 CE) was from an Arabic translation produced considerably later than this date, by an anonymous Muslim scholar aided by another scholar-yogin named Ambhuanāth. See “Putative Literary Transmission of the Pool of Nectar” in C. Ernst, “The Islamization of Yoga in the *Amṛtakunḍa* Translations,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 13:2 (2003), 199–226, especially 203–4. Also see C. Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 15:1 (2005), 15–43. Also see his “Being Careful with

the Goddess: Yoginis in Persian and Arabic Texts,” in P. Chakrovorty and S. Kugle (eds.), *Performing Ecstasy: The Poetics and Politics of Religion in India* (forthcoming). A third major yoga text to mention is the *Yoga Vaśiṣṭha* (*Jug Bāsisht*) which was, again, only available to a Muslim readership in a later period — translated from Sanskrit into Persian by Niẓām al-Din al-Pānipatī in the late 16th century CE at the behest of the Mughal emperor Jahāngir while still crown prince. Presently it was even commented on by a major “Indophile” figure from the School of Isfahan, Mīr Findiriskī (d. 1641 CE) in his *Uṣūl al-Fuṣūl*. The Indian Mughal prince, Dārā Shikūh (d. 1659 CE) was in turn responsible for a number of translations of Hindu sacred texts, notably the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad-Gītā.

3. In Persian it was also sometimes called *dīn-i sbāmkunī* (sic., with metathesis).
4. Simnānī, *Chibīl Majlis*, ed. N.M. Hirawī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Adīb, 1987), 84.
5. Jamal J. Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ‘Alā’ ad-dawla as-Simnānī* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), note 16, 18. Somnāth is better known as the Hindu (in fact Śaivite) complex which was sacked and looted by Maḥmūd of Ghazna in 416-17/1025-6. Some Buddhist presence at Somnāth was noted long ago in scholarship on the Hindu site, e.g., W. Postan, “Notes of a Journey to Girnar,” *Journal of the Asiatic society of Bengal* 7:2 (1838), 865–87, cited in R. Thapar, *Somanatha* (Verso, 2005), 21. However, it seems more likely that the name Somnāth, as the 13th century Parinda’s monastery, is a mistake. Is it possible that the contemporary Buddhist center in question was instead the great monastery of Somapura in Bengal, a major center of Tantric Buddhism, visited by many Tibetan monks, and in fact the home for many years of the great 11th century CE Tantric scholar Atiśa? Somapura seems to have survived into the 13th century CE, tolerated (if neglected) by the Hindu Sena dynasty, and falling outside the territory conquered by the aforementioned Muḥammad b. Bakhtiyār al-Khaljī when he killed the last Sena king, Lakṣmaṇa Sena.
6. Translated by G.H. Mullin, *The Six Yogas of Nārōpa* (Ithaca and Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 1996).
7. The link of Nārōpa’s “six principles” yoga with Yogācāra thought is supported by the fact that the six yogas are mainly associated with the Kagyu sect (Tib., *bka’ brgyud*) whose practices and doctrinal perspective owe much to Yogācāra. Modern Kagyu teachers have indeed overseen a series of English translations of texts by the great 4th century CE founder of Yogācāra, Asanga. However, the complex history of the doctrinal affiliations of the various schools prevents an unqualified attribution of the six yogas to Yogācāra premises. Thus, one of the main authorities in the six yogas through his aforementioned book “The Three Inspirations,” was Tsongkhapa Chenpo (d. 1419), founder of the reformist Geluk-pa who officially uphold the superiority of the Madhyamaka over the Yogācāra school.
8. W.Y. Evans-Wentz (ed.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 11.
9. Mullin, *op. cit.*, 36–39.
10. F. Meier (ed.), *Die Fawā’ih al-Ġamāl wa Fawā’ih al-Ġalāl des Naḡm ad-Dīn al-Kubrā* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1957), para. 60, 28.
11. “The [internall] substance only witnesses its own origin, it only wills its own origin, and it only feels nostalgia for its own origin” (*inna ’l-jawhara lā yushābīdu illā mā’danabu wa lā yurīdu illā mā’danabu wa lā yaḥimnu illā ilā mā’danībi*). *Ibid.*, para. 11, 5.
12. *Wa yaḥussu ’l-sayyāru tawalluda ’l-anwāri min jamī’i badānībi ka-dbālīka wa rubbamā yuksbafu ’l-ḥijābu ’an kullī ’l-anāniyyati fa-tarā bi-kullī ’l-badani al-kulla*. *Ibid.*, para. 66, 31.
13. Hamid Algar (tr.), *The Path of God’s Bondsmen from Origin to Return: A Sufi Compendium by Najm al-Dīn Rāzī, known as Dāya* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1982), 103.
14. *Ibid.*, 179.
15. *Ibid.*, 298.
16. *Ibid.*, 295.
17. W.Y. Evans-Wentz (ed.), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 92.
18. *Ibid.*, 96.

19. It may be noteworthy that many modern accounts of “near death experiences” mention approaching an apparently identical radiance which, while brighter than any light hitherto seen by the physical eye, is yet un-dazzling. Attempts have been made to explain this through the progressive disinhibition of neuronal activity in the visual cortex of the brain, as a consequence of anoxia. S. Blackmore, *Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience* (London: Grafton, 1993), 81 ff. An objection to this might be that Sufis and yogins systematically cultivate, and report having, the same photic experience while alive — the precise point of “clear light yoga’ (*’od gsal*) in the six yogas system, being for the adept to move beyond the semblant (i.e., visualized) clear light, and to experience actual clear light.” See Mullin, *op. cit.*, 81 ff.

20. G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*, tr. G. Samuel (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 62–63. Italics mine.

21. H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, tr. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon: Omega Publications, 1994), 61. The brief anonymous treatise referred to by Corbin had been studied over a century earlier by Fleischer, *Ueber die farbigen Lichterscheinungen der Sufi’s*, according to the Leipzig Ms. 187: *De veriis luminibus singulorum graduum Suficorum propriis*. See *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 16 (Leipzig, 1862), 235–241.

22. E.g. A. Wayman, “A Defense of Yogacara Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 46, number 4 (October 1996), 447–476.

23. E.g., J.L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

24. Sthiramati’s *nirākāra-vijñāna-vāda* was basically compatible with the “void doctrine” (*Śūnyavāda*) of the Madhyamaka school, and was presently synthesised with it by Śāntirakṣita (d. 788).

25. For a recent collection of studies on the history of idealism in Western philosophy see Stephen Gersh and Dermot Moran (eds.), *Eriugena, Berkeley, and the Idealist Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). Yogācāra tends to have been particularly compared with the subjective idealism of George Berkeley (d. 1753). Idealist trends continue in surprising quarters. Some recent theories in science propose that the substratum of the physical universe may in fact be some kind of consciousness. E.g., David Bohm has suggested that the “implicate order” of reality (as distinguished by him from the “explicate order”) is *mind-like*. He identifies it with the Schrödinger wave field. P. Pylkkanen (ed.), *The Search for Meaning* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1989), 59.

26. Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 103.

27. *Ibid.*, 104.

28. *Ibid.*, 166.

29. *Ibid.*, 167.

30. *Ibid.*, 182.

31. Meier, *op. cit.*, para. 67, 32.

32. The *ḥadīth* is found in slightly different forms in the collections of Muslim, Ibn Māja and Ibn Ḥanbal. See A.J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane 2eme edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 1: 424.

33. Algar, *op. cit.*, 304–5.

34. The 6th century CE philosopher Olympiodorus of Alexandria, for example, employs this notion in his commentary on Plato’s *Gorgias*. But the idea seems to have received its first clear formulation in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, where it occurs in a variety of ways. See e.g., *Libellus VIII*, which speaks of “man, who has been made in the image of the cosmos.” W. Scott (ed. and tr.), *Hermetica* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 176–7.

35. Elias, *op. cit.*, 68.

36. Meier, *op. cit.*, para. 135, 64.

37. *Ibid.*, para. 124, 59.

38. Algar, *op. cit.*, 280.

39. *Ibid.*, 279.

40. Tucci, *op. cit.*, 157–8.

41. Mullin, *op. cit.*, 150 ff.
42. Elias, *op. cit.*, 127. Elias is paraphrasing a section of Simnānī's *Risāla faḥ al-mubīn li-abī al-yaqīn*.
43. Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, tr. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon: Omega Publications, 1994), especially 124 ff. Also J. Elias, *op. cit.*, especially chapter 5, 79 ff.
44. Elias, *op. cit.*, 81.
45. Simnānī presents this elaborate framework for interpreting scripture in his introduction to the major Qur'ān commentary co-authored by him, Dāya and Kubrā. See Paul Nwyia (ed.), "Muqaddima tafsīr al-qur'ān li-'Alā' ad-dawla as-Simnānī," in *al-Abḥāth* 26 (1973–77), 141–157.
46. See Marcia K. Hermansen, "Shāh Walī Allāh's Theory of the Subtle Spiritual Centers: A Sufi Model of Personhood and Self-Transformation," in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, (Jan., 1988), 1–25.
47. ". . . The three energy channels are envisioned as running up the center of the body, with the chakras at the four upper sites: crown, throat, heart and just below the navel. One can also visualize four lower chakras, beginning at the navel and going down to the tip of the jewel. Beginners generally work primarily with the four upper chakras, and most texts on the Six Yogas do not give much detail to the four lower ones." Mullin, *op. cit.*, 64.
48. Mullin, *op. cit.*, 143.
49. W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (Varanasi/Kathmandu: Pilgrims Publishing, n.d.), 192.
50. *Ibid.*, 193.
51. Significantly, even in later translations of yoga-related texts into languages like Persian, there is a trend for Sanskrit or Hindi terms for *kuṇḍalinī* to be simply transliterated — suggesting the lack of any clear parallel concept in Muslim languages. E.g. The Persian *Kāmarūpa Seed Syllables*: speaks of drawing ". . . *shakti* up from the navel with magical imagination and thought." See Ernst, "Being Careful with the Goddess."
52. Algar, *op. cit.*, 197–8.
53. See, e.g., Alfred Guillaume (tr.), *The Life of Muḥammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 183.
54. Guillaume, *op. cit.*, 182.
55. The companion here referred to is seemingly Burāq, but is usually taken to be the Archangel Gabriel.
56. *Utiya bi'l-mi'rāji wa lam ara shay'an qaṭṭu aḥsana minbu wa buwa'lladbi yamuḍdu ilaybi mayyitukum 'aynaybi idbāḥadara fa-aṣadanī ṣāhibī fībi ḥattā 'nabā bī ilā bābin min abwābi 'l-samā' . . .* Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabī, 1408/1987), 4 vols., vol. 2, p. 54. For the English as here quoted, see Guillaume, *Life of Muḥammad*, 185.
57. Referred to, for example, in the *Ṣaṭcakra Nirūpana*. The *Brahmadvāra* is defined as "the entrance and exit of kuṇḍalinī in her passage to and from Shiva." A. Avalon, *The Serpent Power* (London: Luzac, 1919), part 2, 13.
58. The *Bardo Thödol* thus speaks of death as the release of the vital force from the median nerve, through the "aperture of Brahmā." Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 91–2. It is perhaps noteworthy that the close association of "out of body experiences" with "near death experiences" has become a commonplace of modern parapsychological and thanatological research.
59. Guillaume, *Life of Muḥammad*, 183.
60. *Ibid.*, 255. The statement is also found expressed in the third, rather than first, person, for example in the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitābal-Tawḥīd*: "*tanāmu 'aynubu wa lā yanāmu qalbubu.*"
61. Song of Solomon 5:2.
62. The *Turīya* is described as "peaceful, auspicious and non-dual" (*śāntaṃ śivaṃ advaitam*). Maṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 1.7.
63. W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, 223.

A Buddhist Origin for Islamic Blockprinting?

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Although the history of Islamic blockprinting is now finally receiving the attention it so rightfully deserves, many unanswered questions still remain.¹ Indeed, we know very little about not only how this technology developed in the Muslim world, but also why it was abandoned.² Clearly, these are large questions that invariably touch upon everything from the history of Islamic theology to issues of the political, cultural, and economic history of the Muslim world; thus, a short piece such as this cannot give these issues the full attention they so rightfully deserve. Nevertheless, it is without a doubt that these questions need to be addressed not only so that the history of printing in the Islamic world is better understood, but also to insure that this history is no longer ignored within the broader global history of printing.³

To this end, the aim of this article is to begin this endeavor. At the outset, however, I must confess that the argument presented herein is speculative. Indeed, the few scholars who actually specialize in the history of Islamic printing have no doubt avoided tackling these larger historical questions precisely because the extant material is so fragmentary and thus does not lend itself to readily answering these issues. Rather, as Schaeffer has pointed out, most work on the extant Arabic blockprints has been less concerned with this material in terms of the history of Islam and printing, and more focused on how these documents shed light on issues of “codicology, papyrology, and palaeography.”⁴ Yet, as Schaeffer has also pointed out this is now changing and in fact the “development of critical scholarship about medieval Arabic block printing as a cultural phenomenon” is now beginning.⁵ It is therefore in this spirit that the following argument is situated: as a starting point in the larger quest to understand the broader history and significance of printing in the Islamic world. And what is the argument? Quite simply that the technology of blockprinting was adopted, or borrowed, or learned by the Muslims of Inner Asia from their Buddhist neighbors.

To make sense of this argument we need to begin with a brief historical sketch of the time frame in which Islamic blockprinting arose and was employed; namely the tenth to the fifteenth century. In particular, it is vital to recall that this was a period of enormous change. In the ninth century, for example, the Eurasian system had largely collapsed when the great medieval empires came to an end — the Tang dynasty, the Tibetan and

Turk empires, and the Abbasids — and as a result there was not only a worldwide economic collapse, but also a political power vacuum. It was, of course, within this turmoil that the various Inner Asian conquest dynasties arose — such as the Seljuks, Qara Khitai, and the Mongols — peoples who would create states that would dominate Eurasian history during the particular four-century period during which Islamic block-printing made its appearance.

Nevertheless, in thinking about these connections it is important to recall that the existence, or knowledge of a certain technology, does not by definition mean that a particular society will adopt it. The case of printing being, of course, a prime example of this maxim not only in the Muslim world, but also in East and South Asia as well. Thus, another fundamental question is invariably what social, cultural, economic or political changes produce such cultural transformations whereby new technologies are adopted? In the case of modern Arabic printing, for example, which began largely in the eighteenth century, one can readily point to the realities of European colonialism and all that it entailed. But what about in the medieval period? What caused Muslims to suddenly adopt a technology that they certainly knew about, but had avoided adopting themselves for centuries?

To answer this question we can begin by noting that the coming of the Seljuks, much less the Mongols, was perceived in the Muslim *imaginaire* as an apocalyptic nightmare.⁶ Yet even so, it was also precisely on account of these massive disruptions that there resulted much reevaluation not only about what it meant to be Muslim, but also about the very nature of Islamic society.⁷ Indeed, with the coming of the Qara Khitai in the twelfth century Muslims, for the first time since the Arab conquests, even had to come to terms with the reality of non-Muslim rule. And it was in this context that Muslim jurists used the principle of justice to legitimate non-Muslim rule, which was succinctly summarized in the famous phrase — “A just infidel is preferable to an unjust Muslim ruler” — that was remarkably attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.⁸

Yet the appearance of the Turks and Mongols not only fostered such radical reconceptualizations in Islamic religio-political thought. During this same time period the Muslim world also witnessed a monumental cultural, or perhaps more aptly, an aesthetic revolution. Namely, during the twelfth century the Islamic prohibition against representational art, which had largely been upheld since it was first instituted in the middle of the eighth century,⁹ was challenged. An important question is thus why this radical shift happened when it did? Why did the eastern half of the Islamic world undergo a “radical revolution in taste that affected all manufactured goods from books to buildings”?¹⁰

One explanation can be found in the disunity of the Muslim world on account of the waning power of the Abbasids and their orthodoxy, which created an “equilibrium” that Marshall Hodgson has called “the victory of Sunni internationalism.”

The new territories of Anatolia and India had been conquered, the Crusades had been almost entirely repulsed, heterodox groups had weakened or were being incorporated into new political and intellectual syntheses, mysticism and ortho-

doxy were developing a symbiotic relationship, and, in spite of considerable bickering and fighting among various dynasties, the Ayyubids, Seljuqs of Rum or Kirman, Ghorids, Khorezmshahs, Kara-Khitays, and other locally based feudal kingdoms had settled into a certain equilibrium. The long rule of the caliph al-Nasir (1180–1225), the only imaginative and powerful ‘Abbasid to reign after the second half of the tenth century, in many ways symbolizes what seemed a reasonable and satisfied state within the Muslim body politic.¹¹

Another factor in this aesthetic revolution was also the Turko-Mongol rearrangement of the Eurasian world, which not only shattered earlier pre-conceptualizations, but also opened up the Muslim world to outside influences. And perhaps the most famous of these developments, as it pertains to the world of art, was the appearance of portraits of Muhammad at this time.¹² As a result, it is therefore clear that within this particular moment in Muslim history there was a cultural revolution.¹³ Representational art was thus not only being produced, but it was also suddenly fashionable and the urban bourgeoisie were sponsoring and buying such objects in order to confirm both their taste and status.¹⁴ It therefore seems reasonable to assume that during such an age of momentous change that the Islamic taboo against printing could have been challenged, or at least questioned. Yet at the same time there still remains the final question: where would they have obtained their knowledge of printing technology?

To fully fathom the import of this question it is again important to recall the larger historical context. In particular, it needs to be understood that prior to the upheavals of the tenth century and the subsequent appearance of the Turks and Mongols there had existed for a long time a general disconnect between the Abbasid Caliphate and Asia as a whole. This, however, is not to suggest that Muslim traders had not been active in Asia. As we know there were supposedly 100,000 Muslims in ninth-century Canton,¹⁵ and many others in India and Tibet.¹⁶ Yet, at the same time, it is important to note that such business contacts did not by definition lead to any lasting cultural contact, much less interest, in Asian societies among the Muslim elite.¹⁷ Indeed, the radical disconnect between the world of Islam and Asia is well-borne out by the fact that for centuries Muslim authors wrote about Chinese dynasties as if they were contemporary, when in reality they had collapsed centuries earlier.¹⁸ And in fact this misunderstanding was only to be corrected once the two worlds were brought back into direct contact after the appearance of the Turks in the Middle East.

At this time Muslims, however, did not only reacquaint themselves with Asian history, there also developed a certain fascination with China — a sort of Islamic *chinoiserie*, which was no doubt connected to revived overland trade between China and the Middle East ushered in by the Qarakhanids.¹⁹ Tha‘alibi’s *Book of Curious and Entertaining Information (Lata‘if al-ma‘arif)*, for example, which was composed in Nishapur in 1038, describes China in a manner that seems to indicate an influx of new knowledge of the East. Tha‘alibi, for example, reports about new technological developments in China such as napkins made of asbestos “for wiping away fat or grease, which, when dirty, can be thrown into the fire and made clean, without getting at all

burnt.”²⁰ Moreover, instead of praising Chinese painters for their skill, which was by this point a cliché in the Muslim world, Tha‘alibi writes breathlessly about the glories of Chinese sculptors who are able to represent human figures “leaving out absolutely nothing except the man’s soul.”²¹

In turn it was precisely this fascination and largely positive view of China that the Qara Khitai used so successfully to rule Muslim Inner Asia during the eleventh and twelfth century.²² Indeed, as Biran shows in her study of the Western Liao, Muslim sources at this time are filled with paeans to Chinese ingenuity, and even nostalgic reveries about the wonders of Tang rule. In particular, according to these same Muslim sources it was during the Tang dynasty that paper was introduced into the Islamic world from China.²³ And while papermaking technology was no doubt transmitted from China into the Islamic world at this earlier time, what is important to recognize is that this technology was actually transmitted across Eurasia by Buddhists.²⁴ It was also Buddhists who implemented the first mass-production of texts through the use of printing in the early eighth century.²⁵ Yet as noted above, even though both of these technologies existed in this early period, only one of them was adopted in the Islamic world. The art of printing would have to wait until the concatenation of social and political forces outlined above were set in motion, whereby resistance to printing was apparently overcome.

Of course, as noted above, much of this historical reconstruction is based on inference of various possibilities. On one level it may therefore seem plausible; however, the fact of the matter is that we do not have any direct evidence for such a transmission. Yet in thinking about this lack of evidence we need to recognize that printing was never considered a major technological achievement until the modern West. Indeed, as Furth has brilliantly pointed out, the classic “Needham question” of who came first, and why, is fundamentally misguided since it is based upon the teleological narrative of the modern West. In East Asia and the Muslim world where there was no conception of the “socially transformative potentials of technology,” the history of printing is completely absent.

For example the most comprehensive work on technologies of the late empire, Song Yingxing’s 17th century *Tiangong kaiwu* (Exploitation of the Works of Nature), has a section on paper making but nothing on printing. Joseph McDermott, researching his *A Social History of the Chinese Book*, looked in vain for descriptions of woodblock printing technology in pre-modern sources, and found them only in nineteenth century writings by Western missionaries who were looking into ways to propagate translations of the Christian Bible. So through most of Chinese history, it would seem that Chinese didn’t celebrate printing as a major technical achievement of their civilization.²⁶

It was apparently the same in the Muslim world, where, much as was the case in East Asia, printing was not considered to be a revolutionary technology, but rather a low level craft. The fact that printing technology is not lauded in Chinese and Arabic sources is therefore not too surprising.

Such a view, of course, does not make our task of piecing together the historical development of Arabic blockprinting easy. In fact, from the vantage point of the 21st century it is most likely impossible to pinpoint the direct course of transmission. Yet, the political and cultural shifts outlined above do seem to provide a context in which such a transmission could have taken place. In fact, there is even a tantalizing story from this period of time that points to such a possibility. Namely, in the tenth century there was a wedding between a Chinese princess and the son of the Samanid ruler Nasr b. Ahmad. Although this episode is admittedly only recounted in a much later Muslim source, and in a very convoluted manner,²⁷ it seems evident that it describes an actual marriage alliance that was established between the powerful Buddhist ruler of Dunhuang, Cao Yijin (r. 914–35), and the Muslim court of Bukhara.²⁸ Of course, whether any major cultural transmission actually occurred as a result of this wedding is wholly unknown. Rather, what is important about this story is that it reveals precisely the shifting nature of the relations between East and West at this time that were outlined above. A world wherein not only Muslims and Buddhists were once again coming into direct contact with one another, but also one wherein earlier theological and political certainties were about to be completely exploded. And, of course, it is precisely in such a world were a radical innovation such as printing could be transmitted and adopted in the Muslim world.

Moreover, what lends further credence to this hypothesis is that printing was not the only technology moving between East and West. Indeed, the most well known example of this phenomenon as it pertains particularly to Buddhist-Muslim exchange is the borrowing of the Buddhist monastery as a model for the development of the Islamic madrasa, which itself became the basis of the university in the Christian West.²⁹ While the full dynamics of this transmission are not fully understood — and indeed they are still debated — there are other examples of East-West interaction as evidenced in the Buddhist influence on Muslim art.

Geometrical and vegetal patterns, lions and mythical creatures which decorate Buddhist ivory panels and stone carvings reappear in later Islamic art, either faithfully copied, or in somewhat modified forms. However, the impact of Buddhism is perhaps most strongly manifested in early Islamic metalwork. Surprisingly not only the decorative designs were borrowed from Buddhist art, but more explicitly, Islamic metalworkers copied the forms of Buddhist monuments, first of all the shape of the stupas.³⁰

Yet such transfers between the Buddhist and Islamic worlds were not unidirectional, nor were they exclusively in the realm of material products. There were also intellectual exchanges as evidenced in the transmission of Greek medical knowledge into Tibet,³¹ which involved not only the theoretical conceptualizations of Galen, but also practical applications such as the Muslim methods of urine analysis and the healing of head wounds, both of which became a part of the Tibetan medical tradition.³²

Of course, the transmission of the healing arts is a common feature of cross-cultural contact since such sciences often operate beyond the bounds of political and religious

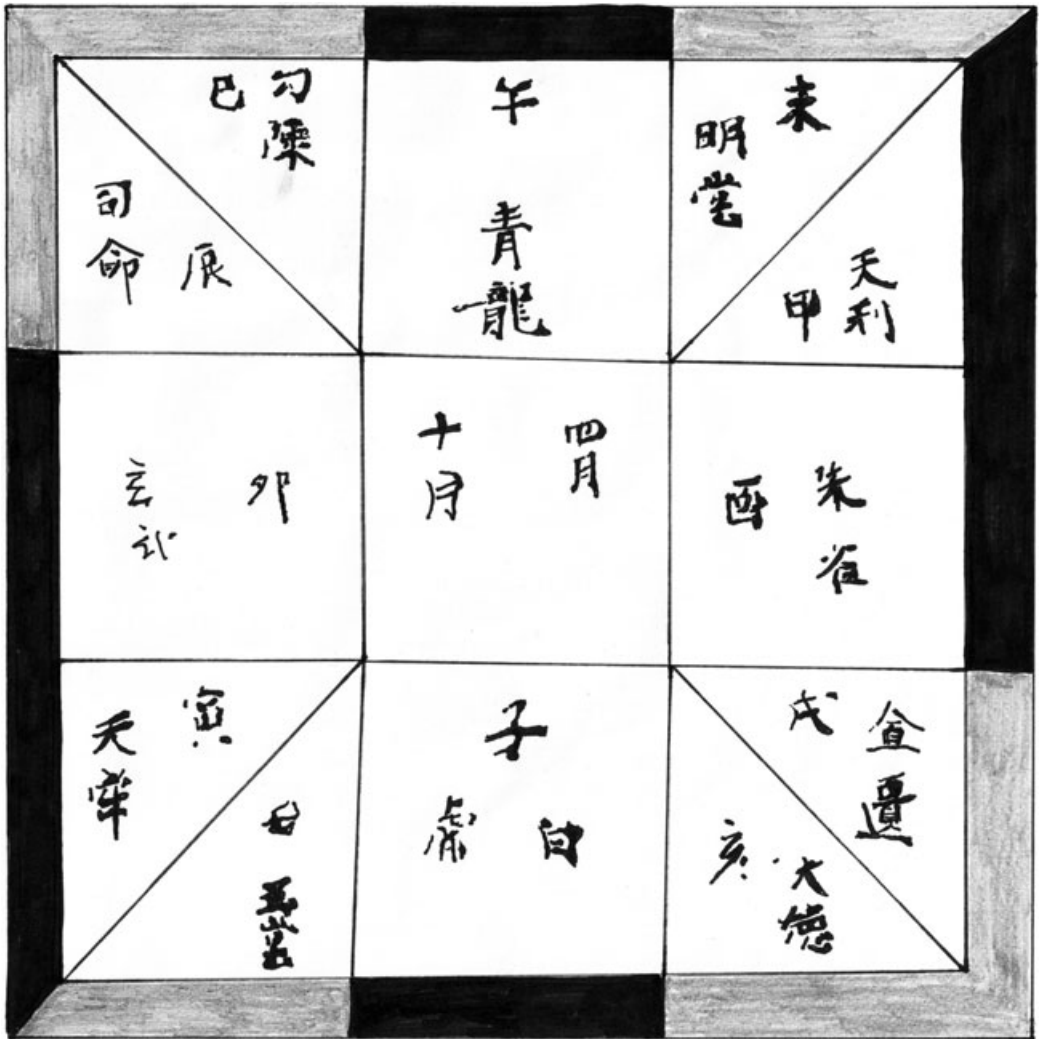


Figure 1. Chinese magic square. Line drawing of P 2964 r, *Bibliothèque nationale de France*. After Kalinowski (2003): 298, ill. 22.

orthodoxy. As in the case in India, for example, where there is “good evidence that Hindu physicians and alchemists were welcomed into the courts of Muslim princes whose thirst for immortality, increased virility, and the philosopher’s stone would have been stronger than their religious fervor. [And] we know that Muslim physicians, alchemists, and mystics were avid for the wisdom of their Indian counterparts.”³³ Thus it is perhaps not surprising that it is within the realms of healing and magic that we also find exchange between Asia and the Muslim world as evidenced in the case of the so-called “magic squares.”³⁴ (see figures 1 and 2).

since the time of the Buddha,³⁵ but also that the actual development of printing has roots in the creation of amulets by Buddhists and Daoists in early China.³⁶ Indeed, it is largely out of the spiritual battle with the unseen forces carried out by these two religious traditions that the Buddhist art of printing amulets developed. And in turn the printing of amulets was to play an integral role in the transmission of Buddhism in both China and Inner Asia.³⁷ Thus the fact that a similar practice would suddenly appear in the Muslim world, especially when Buddhist-Muslim exchange was reviving and Muslim notions about everything from politics to aesthetics was being re-evaluated, does not seem to be simply a coincidence.³⁸

Indeed, the penultimate piece of evidence for such a transmission is borne out by the physical similarities between Arabic amulets and their Buddhist prototypes. For example, several motifs found on the Arabic amulets, such as the lotus in the square and the grid of squares (see figure 3), are similar to many Buddhist, especially Chinese and Tibetan, amulets.³⁹ Yet what is most intriguing about the Arabic amulets is that they do not follow the standard codex format of traditional Muslim books. Rather, the majority of these amulets are printed on pages in the distinctive long and narrow *pustaka* style of Buddhist texts, which are based on the palm leaf manuscripts of India.

Indeed, based simply on these external features of the Arabic amulets it seems as if Muslims simply adopted the most prevalent form of paper in Buddhist Inner Asia, which was the *pustaka*, and used it to print their own amulets.

On one level, however, the narrow *pustaka* may not seem to be the best format for the long and flowing style of Arabic script, especially when it has to be carved into wooden blocks. Yet, in this regard, it is important to recall that other Aramaic-derived scripts used in Buddhist Inner Asia, such as Sogdian and Uygur, were also printed in the *pustaka* format.⁴⁰ Of course, under the influence of Chinese these scripts were eventually read top-to-bottom rather than right-to-left, yet such a difference would make no difference in the carving of such blocks since the resulting text could clearly be turned any which way in order to make it legible (see figure 4).

It therefore does not seem too farfetched to imagine that the carvers of Buddhist woodblocks, who were probably Chinese, could have used their skills to produce Arabic blockprints. Indeed, all they would have needed would be someone literate in Arabic who could have written out the text that could then be used as the basis for the carved block. Either way, however, what is interesting to note about the *pustaka* format is that it did not remain solely within the world of blockprinting and amulets. Rather, the power or popularity of this Buddhist-derived format was apparently so pervasive that in certain contexts it even came to supplant the traditional codex. In 12th century Afghanistan, for example, calligraphic Qurans were prepared in the *pustaka* format.⁴¹ What these particular exemplars tell us about the transmission of printing and its tension with the written word is no doubt an interesting question; however, the point to be made here is that these texts reveal again the apparent Buddhist influence in the medieval Muslim world. Moreover, it also seems to lend credence to the argument that Muslims developed



Figure 3. Arabic Amulet. The Madina Collection of Islamic Art, gift of Camilla Chandler Frost (M.2002.1.371), reproduced courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

the tradition of blockprinting amulets through their relations with Buddhists in Inner Asia.⁴²

In this regard it also relevant to recall that this argument about Buddhist-Muslim exchange is based not only on the historical context wherein such transmission was possible, but also on the value both traditions placed on such practices. Indeed, in thinking about this issue we need to recognize how important amulets actually were for the majority of people at this time. Amulets were a powerful tool in dealing with the demons and spirits beyond one's control. Moreover, as seen in the case of the Buddhho-Daoist feuds in early China it often did not matter to the holder of an amulet whether it was specifically Buddhist or Daoist — what mattered is that it worked⁴³ — a reality that is well captured in a story told by William of Rubrick:

In China, the Mongols asked both William and Odoric to expel demons. As William and his party traveled through steep and jagged rocks, his guide requested 'a prayer which could chase away the demons because in this place the devils were known to carry away men without their knowing what was happening to them.' William did not interrogate the guide's fears, or suggest that the real culprits might be bandits. Demons were expected in the wilderness. 'Then we sang loudly "*Credo in unum Deum*" ' [I Believe in One God] and by the grace of God we passed through safe and sound." The guide and his men, impressed, requested that William write out charms for them to wear on their heads, as one might ask of a soothsayer. Instead, William offered to teach them the *Credo* and the Lord's Prayer. When his interpreter could not translate either one, William wrote them out — confirming the guide's notion of what religious authorities should do.⁴⁴

It was therefore in such a world, wherein amulets could keep evil at bay, that the technology of printing had such powerful resonances. Indeed, within the larger historical context outlined above, wherein Buddhist-Muslim exchange was happening and the Muslim world was open to outside influences, one can rightfully wonder: why would they not have adopted printing?

Of course, such a supposition is still purely conjecture, and the actual history and mechanics of such a technology transfer are now lost in the proverbial fog of history. Nevertheless, what all of the above inferences hopefully make clear is that the origin of Islamic blockprinting seems to lie in Buddhist Inner Asia. In fact, such a hypothesis is not purely speculation. Rather, we have evidence of an historical episode that reveals precisely the world in which such a technological transfer from the Buddhist to the Muslim world could have taken place: in 1295 the Mongol ruler of Iran, a Buddhist, converted to Islam, and what is interesting is that an amulet played an important role.

I sent him a robe which he put on, and he also wore a woolen cloak. He went to the palace where we joined him; he was standing. The people gathered round from all sides, (including) the army and the royal women. It was a great affair. I stayed at his side, and Nauruz was with me too; I had a talisman with me, in which (were written) some of the prayers of the Shaikh and his words and epitomes. He (Ghazan) saw it and asked about it. Nauruz explained what it was, giving some

information about my father, and told him some of his miracles and traditions. I took out the talisman and presented it to him; he looked at it and gave it back to me. I put it in its pouch and handed it over to him. He took it and slung it over his right side. I suggested that he put it on the left side, as was customary, which he did. He was overcome with bashfulness and embarrassment, being only a youth not yet thirty years old and of fair complexion. He left the baths and shyness overcame him, so that his blush deepened.

Then Nauruz talked to him about Islam, and the king said, 'I have given my promise on this, and now is the time, with this son of the Shaikh present.' (Sadr al-Din said), Then he looked at me, and asked, 'How should I say it?' I told him, raising up my finger: 'I bear witness that there is no God but God,' which he pronounced. Then I said, 'and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' Then he talked with Nauruz in Turkish and said, '(should) I bear witness once more?' (Nauruz) said yes, and he pronounced it (again).

When he had finished, one and all thronged round where he was sitting, and it was impossible to restrain anyone (approaching) and scattering gold and silver and pearls over him. The people began picking him up, and kissing the king's hands and feet and asking his blessing. They became vociferous and the delight intensified. It was impossible to restrain anyone, and no-one was diffident about approaching the king. He sat on a throne and the people remained below him, carrying on their antics and their rejoicing, while he was looking at them and laughing.⁴⁵

The conversion of Ghazan Khan therefore not only reveals the importance of amulets in both the Buddhist and Muslim traditions, but also affords us a glimpse of the medieval Buddho-Muslim world ushered in by the Turko-Mongol conquest dynasties, during which a valuable technology such as blockprinting could be transmitted from East to West.

Endnotes

1. Karl R. Schaeffer, *Enigmatic Charms: Medieval Arabic Book Printed Amulets in American and European Libraries and Museums* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
2. Conventional history has it that printing in the Islamic world was put to a definitive end by the Ottoman sultan Beyeid II (r. 1481–1512), who outlawed printing in the empire shortly after it was introduced by Jews expelled from *reconquista* Spain.
3. For the most current reevaluation of the history of printing see the on-going project "Printing in a Global Context," organized by Jack Wills at the USC-Huntington Early Modern Studies Institute (<http://college.usc.edu/emsi/conferences/index.html>).
4. Karl Schaeffer, "What Was the True Extent of Medieval Arabic Block Printing?" (Unpublished paper presented at the Global History of Printing Symposium, USC, April 24, 2009, available at <http://college.usc.edu/emsi/conferences/index.html>), 7.
5. Schaeffer, "Extent of Medieval Arabic Block Printing?," 2.
6. On the Islamic response to the Seljuk invasions see David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2002), 84–91.

7. On the broader impact of the Turks on Islamic thought see, for example, Wilferd Madelung, "The Spread of Maturidism and the Turks," in *Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam*, II (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), 109–168.
8. A.K.S. Lambton, "Justice in the Medieval Persian Theory of Kingship," *Studia Islamica* 17 (1962): 91–119.
9. Daan van Reenen, "The *Bilderverbot*, a New Survey," *Der Islam* 67, 1 (1990): 27–77.
10. Oleg Grabar, *The Illustrations of the Maqamat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 150.
11. Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 255.
12. Robert Hillenbrand, "The Arts of the Book in Ilkhanid Iran," in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courty Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353*, eds. Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 135–167.
13. On the architectural changes ushered in during this period see, for example, Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).
14. Oleg Grabar, "The Illustrated *Maqamat* of the Thirteenth Century: the Bourgeoisie and the Arts," in *Islamic Visual Culture, 1100–1800* (Burlington: Ashgate Variorum, 2006), 167–186.
15. The Muslims of Canton were expelled during the Huang Chao rebellion of 879 CE. On this rebellion and its impact see Howard S. Levy, *Biography of Huang Ch'ao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 113–121; and George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 64–75.
16. The importance of Tibet lay in its famous deer musk, which, according to the Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal, was "superior in both quality and price to all the varieties of musk. On the Muslim-Tibetan musk trade see also Ferrand, *Voyage du marchand arabe Sulayman*, 109–111; and Corneille Jest, "Valeurs d'échange en Himalaya et au Tibet: lambre et le musc," in *De la route celeste au terroir, du jardin au foyer*, ed. Lucien Bernot *et al.* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1987), 227–238; and, more recently, Anna Akasoy and Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, "Along the Musk Routes: Exchanges between Tibet and the Islamic World," *Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity* 3, 2 (2007): 217–240; and Anya King, *The Musk Trade and the Near East in the Early Medieval Period* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2007).
17. As has been shown by Tansen Sen, increased commercial activity does not by definition lead to increased cultural awareness, see his *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 243.
18. André Miquel, "L'Inde et la Chine vues du côté de l'Islam," in *As Others See Us: Mutual Perceptions, East and West*, eds. Bernard Lewis, Edmund Leites, and Margaret Case (New York: International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, 1985), 285.
19. Peter B. Golden, "The Karakhanids and Early Islam," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 343–370.
20. Tha'alibi, *The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information*, trans. C.E. Bosworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 141.
21. Tha'alibi, *Book of Curious and Entertaining Information*, 141.
22. Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
23. On the impact of paper in Muslim Inner Asia see David J. Roxburgh, *The Persian Album 1400–1600: From Dispersal to Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 159–165.
24. Jonathan M. Bloom, *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 32–45.
25. On the development of printing in Buddhist China see T.H. Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

26. Charlotte Furth, "Comments on the Origin of Printing," (Unpublished paper presented at the Global History of Printing Symposium, USC, April 24, 2009, available at <http://college.usc.edu/emi/conferences/index.html>), 2.

27. C.E. Bosworth, "An Alleged Embassy from the Emperor of China to the Amir Nasr b. Ahmad: A Contribution to Samanid Military History," in *Yad-name-ye Irani-ye Minorsky*, eds. Mojtaba Minovi and Iraj Afshar (Tehran: Tehran University, 1969), 17–29.

28. On the history of the Cao family, especially their patronage of Buddhism at Dunhuang, see Sarah E. Fraser, *Performing the Visual: The Practice of Buddhist Wall Painting in China and Central Asia, 618–960* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

29. Robert Hillenbrand, "Madrasa III. Architecture," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P.J. Bearman *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2005).

30. Géza Fehérvári, "Islamic Incense-burners and the Influence of Buddhist Art," in *The Iconography of Islamic Art: Studies in Honour of Robert Hillenbrand*, ed. Bernard O'Kane (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 127. See also A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Buddhist Heritage in the Art of Iran," in *Mabayanist Art After AD 900*, ed. William Watson (London: Percival David Foundation, 1971), 56–73.

31. Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Introduction of Greek Medicine into Tibet in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99, 2 (1979): 297–313; and Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Medieval Scholastic Method in Tibet and the West," in *Reflections on Tibetan Culture: Essays in Memory of Turrell V. Wylie*, ed. L. Epstein and R. Sherbourne (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1990), 307–313.

32. Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim, "On Urine Analysis and Tibetan Medicine's Connections with the West," in *Studies in the History of Tibetan Medicine*, eds. Frances Garrett, Mona Schrempf and Sienna Craig. (Sankt Augustin: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, forthcoming); Dan Martin, "Greek and Islamic Medicines' Historical Contact with Tibet: A Reassessment in View of Recently Available but Relatively Early Sources on Tibetan Medical Eclecticism" (Unpublished paper presented at the Islam and Tibet Conference, November 18, 2006, Warburg Institute, London).

33. David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 106.

34. On the history of magic squares see the three articles by Schuyler Cammann, "Evolution of Magic Squares in China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 80 (1960): 116–124; "Old Chinese Magic Squares," *Sinologica* 7 (1962): 14–53; "Islamic and Indian Magic Squares," *History of Religion* 8 (1968/9): 181–209, and 271–299.

35. On the use of amulets in the Buddhist tradition see Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

36. On the linkage between printing and the Buddhist and Daoist feud for ritual mastery see Michel Strickmann, "The Seal of the Law: A Ritual Implement and the Origins of Printing," *Asia Major*, third series, 6, 2 (1993): 1–83; and Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1–193.

37. See, for example, both the Chinese blockprinted amulets (figs. 140–143, 147, 148, 150, 153), and the mid-tenth century amulets with both Chinese and Sanskrit mantras (figs. 149, 151, 152) in Roderick Whitfield, *The Art of Central Asia: The Stein Collection in the British Museum Vol. 2, Paintings from Dunhuang II* (London: Kodansha International and The Trustees of the British Museum, 1983).

38. In regard to the revival of exchange between the East and West at this time and its relation to the spread of printing technology it is important to note that it was at this same time that the blockprinting of cloth appeared in India (Phyllis Granoff, "Luxury Goods and Intellectual History: The Case of Printed and Woven Multicolored Textiles in Medieval India," *Ars Orientalis* 34 [2004]: 151–171), and that this material was then sold to the Muslim world (Ruth Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt: The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997]).

39. Nik Douglas, *Tibetan Tantric Charms & Amulets: 230 Examples Reproduced from Original Woodblocks* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978).

40. On the history of Uygur blockprinting see Abdurishid Yakup, *Die Uigurischen Blockdrucke der Berliner Turfansammlung, Teil 1: Tantrische Texte* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007); and Abdurishid Yakup, *Die Uigurischen Blockdrucke der Berliner Turfansammlung, Teil 2: Apokryphen, Mahāyāna-Sūtren, Erzählungen, Magische Texte, Kommentare und Kolophone* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008).

41. Francis Richard, *Splendeurs persanes: Manuscrits de XIIe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1997), 37.

42. Another aspect of this transmission that needs further study is the development of blockprinted Hajj certificates, which also seems to derive from the Buddhist practice of giving pilgrimage certificates at holy mountains like Wutai Shan. See Dominique Sourdel and Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Une collection médiévale de certificats de pèlerinage à la Mekke conservés à Istanbul," in *Études médiévales et patrimoine Turc: Volume publié à l'occasion du centième anniversaire de la naissance de Kemal Atatürk*, ed. Janine Sourdel-Thomine (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1983), 167–273; and Şule Aksoy and Rachel Milstein, "A Collection of Thirteenth-Century Illustrated Hajj Certificates," in *M. Ugur Derman Festschrift: Papers Presented on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Irvin Cemil Schick (Istanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 2000), 101–134.

43. On the fluid religious world of early China wherein amulets played a large role see Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

44. Linda L. Barnes, *Needles, Herbs, Gods, and Ghosts: China, Healing, and the West to 1848* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 32.

45. Charles Melville, "Padshah-i Islam: The Conversion of Sultan Mahmud Ghazan Khan," *Pembroke Papers* 1 (1990): 163.

The View of Buddhism on Other Religions

With Special Reference to Islam

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As far as the truth is concerned, it is not easy to look at other religions from the perspective of one's own religion. In old-fashioned logic, truth about "a" and "not a" can never be both true. We have two kinds of religion in the world — theistic and non-theistic; and these two types of religions are widely understood as "a" and "not a" in terms of logic, meaning that if the one is true the other must be false. It is the nature of religion to provide human beings with a means for salvation or some kind of highest religious aim. As the salvation of different religions is normally different, the claim that only "our" salvation is true and the rest are false is commonly found in each religion. As claimed in Buddhist holy texts, the Buddha says to his followers: "There is true salvation only within Buddhism. No salvation possible outside Buddhism."² Sometimes I have heard from Buddhist monks that for them the difference between Buddhism and other religions in the world is that while other religions can give us only the heavens as the highest fruit of religious practice, Buddhism can give human beings *Nirvana* which is higher than the heavens, and there is nothing higher than that. From this standpoint, it seems that I have been confronted with a very serious problem of trying to look at other religions in the world, including Islam, positively — from the viewpoint of Buddhism.

Fortunately, in Thai society where Theravada Buddhism has played an important role for a long time, we have had great thinking-monks such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) who believed that Buddhists in the modern world should take it as a moral responsibility to understand other religions. I am not sure if it is true to label him as a liberal Buddhist thinker and to see those who do not agree with him as conservative Buddhists. "Liberal" sometimes means not following the original position accepted for a long time by the community. I believe that Buddhadasa tried to follow in the Buddha's footsteps, and this means that he is conservative. Theravada Buddhism as adopted in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos is believed to retain, as much as possible, the ways of the Buddha. In general, it is considered more conservative than Mahayana Buddhism. However, being conservative in this context is viewed by Theravada Buddhists themselves, as a strength — it means following in the Buddha's

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footsteps. In this paper, I will utilize the conservative nature of Theravada Buddhism rather than the liberal one of Mahayana because I want to portray the Buddhist view of other religions as close as possible to that of the Buddha himself.

Religion as an organism has life; and, as living beings — religion needs adaptation and renewal. By trying to keep a conservative spirit, it does not mean that I see fault in Mahayana. There are so many good things in this school of Buddhism even though certain concepts could be doubted as being newly invented by its scholars. My starting assumption in this article is that the Buddha was the most open-minded person in terms of faith and religion. So, any narrowness of thought found later in the holy texts of Buddhism, in my view, was created later by succeeding generations of Buddhist thinkers.

Buddhadasa and Dialogue between Religions

As is well known, Buddhadasa always said that he had a number of major objectives in his religious life as a Buddhist monk. One amongst them is: “I will try to make the adherents of each religion in the world understand and appreciate their own religion; and, furthermore, I will try to encourage the mutual understanding of another’s religion between them.”³ It is clear that for him religious dialogue does not and should not mean an attempt to convert other people to one’s own religion. Buddhadasa thought, attempts by monks or preachers of any religion to convert people implies religious bias. In the history of religions of the world, we have found that the Catholic church has undergone major changes in religious dogmas, starting from exclusivist tendency that there is no salvation outside the church, to an inclusivist position which says that there could be small salvation within some religions but that can never be compared with the true salvation of Catholicism, and the pluralist tendencies of today. According to the latest dogma, salvation could be of different aspects and no one among them can be considered of higher status than the rest. Even though the above development may not be accepted widely among the lay Catholics or even the higher priests as they still think that there is salvation only inside the Catholic Church, this could be looked upon as a positive development especially in terms of the mutual understanding between religions, as suggested by Buddhadasa. According to Buddhadasa, nature finds its strength when finally human beings understand how to adjust their religious faiths.⁴ Looking from this line of thought, religious developments cannot be viewed separately from naturally learning from the wrong past. It should be noted that when Buddhadasa speaks of “nature” this term conveys the meaning deeper than the one mostly understood by the public. The word “nature” is widely used in our daily life, but when we are asked, “What do you mean when you say that nature does or does not allow this thing,” we find it difficult to explain the word. In Buddhadasa’s view, nature is a religious concept used in a non-theistic religion like Buddhism. This word can be compared with the word “God” in theistic religions. So, nature plays a positive role in human history and it must not be understood as a word without any actual reference to some entity in the universe.

In Buddhadasa's view, Buddhism and other Indian religions such as Hinduism and Jainism teach *Dharma*. We can say, "*Dharma*" is the Eastern word used to communicate the same thing as "God", in the theistic sense. Thus according to him, the three words — *Dharma*, God, and Nature — share the same meaning as something mysterious, really existing independent of human experience and playing the major roles in determining things in the universe. Buddhadasa's attempt at dialogue between religions shows that all religions share the same truths and these truths are at the heart of each religion. The claim of truth is powerful and human beings are educated enough to reflect on it as something exalted. However, the word "truth" can be empty if it is not well defined. Buddhadasa himself seems to partially fail here as there are a number of religious thinkers, both of theistic and non-theistic traditions, who did not agree with him. For them, God and Nature cannot be the same thing, if each of them has been clearly defined. For example, God is a Person, while Nature is not although some native-animistic traditions have personified nature's characteristics. The argument against Buddhadasa's views should be not considered as rejection of the claiming of truth; but as the rejection of using the word "truth" without clear definition. This is a common criticism of Buddhadasa. He commonly employs terms without clear definitions. But perhaps this is his tactic to be as general and all-encompassing. In a sense this could be his "genius": the ability to speak across traditions. I myself admit that the interpretation employed by Buddhadasa can make great contribution, if it is well developed. I will attempt it in this paper.

What is Truth

Philosophically, this question in the view of some philosophers in the world is one among the questions that cannot be answered clearly. Normally, truth in the philosophical view is defined as a statement that contains these three properties:

- (a) That statement is true.
- (b) We believe it is true.
- (c) And, we have some reason to believe so.

Consider the following example: two men argue about the world — one insists that the world is flat; another says that the world is round. So, we have two different statements as follows:

- (1) The world is flat.
- (2) The world is round.

Of these statements, the first one is not true, but the second one is. The second one is true because (a) this statement is identical with the fact that the world is round, and (b) we have some evidence showing that the above claim is true. For example, we have pictures of the world photographed from satellites and humans aboard spacecraft, to prove this. Normally, when a person says that something is true, such mentioning automatically conveys the belief in the truth of that thing. Actually, the last criterion plays

a major role in judging the truth of the statement. So, sometimes to point out what the truth is, we say that truth is justified belief. There can be several kinds of justification of truth. It seems that all schools of philosophy in the world admit that the sense-experience is undoubtedly claimed as such a kind of justification; so, when we have a picture of the world showing that it is round and not flat, such a picture is the strongest evidence to make the statement: “the world is round” — true.

Besides sense-experience, sometimes reason is raised to be another kind of justification. It should be noted that reason as a kind of justification in epistemology has a specific meaning. It is a process of reasoning used in mathematics or logic. The statement: “ $2 + 4 = 6$ ” is true. The truth of this statement cannot be proved with sense-experience. It must be proved with mathematical analysis and this kind of process in judging the truth of statement is called “reason” in philosophy.

Thomas Aquinas, as it is well known, tried to prove the statement: “God really exists”, as being true. Certainly, he did not use sense-experience to prove the existence of God because he did not have the sensual experience of seeing God. Saint Paul says in the Bible that no one can perceive God with sense-experience. But for him, the limitation of human abilities does not mean that it is not possible to prove the existence of God. It seems that for Saint Paul, some inner feeling about exaltations, such as: love between human fellows, can be used as the justification of the truth about God. Differently, Saint Thomas Aquinas uses reason to prove the existence of God. His way is well known, under a name: The Five Proofs of God.⁵ One among these five proofs says that the universe is moving. Things as we see can never move by themselves. They are usually moved by another. Ultimately, the process of moving must end up at some point. The final point where the process of moving of things in the universe ends, is called by Aquinas as, the First Mover — a word he borrows from Aristotle. So, the fact that the whole universe is moving indicates that there must be something or some one who plays the role of the first mover. And it is no other than God!

We find this kind of reasoning also in Taoism. The question is: can the reason as found in the work of Aquinas be used as a kind of the justification of truth. Strictly speaking, the answer is no. Justification in epistemology is the necessity. The statement: “the world is round”, is necessarily true because we see and calculate it like that. In the same way, the statement “ $2 + 4 = 6$ ” is necessarily true because it is determined by the process of mathematical rules. Unlikely, the statement “God really exists because if there this no God we can never explain how the whole universe is moving” maybe sound reasonable. But it is not necessarily true. It is merely “possibly true.”

From above, we can say that today we have two kinds of established truth. The first one is empirical truth and this kind of truth is mainly found in natural sciences. The second one is logical truth and this kind of truth is mainly found in mathematics and logic. As sometimes truth is claimed to be related to reasoning, empirical truth as found in natural sciences is said to be based on induction, which is a kind of human reasoning; and logical truth as found in mathematics and logic is said to be based on deduction, which is a kind of human reasoning as well. It should be noted that there could be

human reasoning other than induction and deduction, but such a kind of reasoning, cannot be compared with these two kinds of established human reasoning for the reason of necessity, as said above.

Religious Truth

What kind of truth is to be found in religion? It seems that a number of religious teachings in the world refer to things that can be observed by sense-experience, so the truth in this kind of religious statement could be said to be in the empirical category. For example, in Buddhism there is a statement saying that “giving brings happiness more than taking.” In testing which of this statement is true, what a person needs is just to observe and see. Buddhism believes that it is the universal nature of human beings to feel joyfulness in giving more than in taking, irrespective of tradition, religion, or nationality they belong to. Since Buddhism is not a science even though the main body-of-knowledge obtained in Buddhism was gained from the observation of nature — what is interesting, according to Buddhism, is not fact as said but the reason behind such a fact. Why does a person feel more happiness in giving, rather than in taking? The answer from Buddhism is because giving contains more moral properties than taking, in the sense that to give is normally more difficult to do than to take — meaning that a person needs some moral strength to overcome selfishness in giving while in taking such a thing is not needed. So, it is morally right for a person who gives to feel happiness, more so, than a person who takes. This reward is believed by Buddhism as natural, meaning that it is a law of nature stating that giving enables happiness more than taking. Actually, moral laws in Buddhism are believed to be the laws of nature, which are not different from the law of physics, and so on.

However, there are not only the statements that refer to empirical phenomena in human life and the world in religion, but we also have so many statements that refer to things which transcend normal human experience, such as: “a good person will join the heaven with God after death.” In this statement, there are things (at least three — God, heaven, and new life after death) mentioned and cannot be directly observed by sense-experience. How is it possible to verify the truth of such kind of religious statements? According to the Positivist-school of philosophy, statements contain words and words contain meanings. If the words that form the statements do not have the meanings, such statements are empty and meaningless. The meaning of word in the view of a positivist philosopher is real in the world to which a word refers. For example, we have two words. One is “dog” and another is “dragon.” The first one has the meaning because it refers to a kind of animal in this world; but as the second one does not refer to anything really existing in the world — so this word has no meaning. This kind of word, which does not have meaning, but we can understand when seen, is explained by empiricist philosophers such as John Locke — that, it is formed by joining some properties from real things in the world together. Suppose: a dragon is shaped like a snake with wings. This picture surely comes from the combination between two real

animals in the world — snake and bird. Some empiricist philosophers are of the view that many things mentioned in religious texts do not really exist because no one in the world can see them; but these things seem to have meaning in the sense that when people hear these words they understand what they mean. However, the meaning of this kind of statement is not the real meaning. It is just a fictitious meaning.

At present, it seems that we have two major ways to deal with the problem stated above: how do we verify the meaning of religious teachings that refer to things beyond human normal experience? The first, interprets that these statements refer to things that can be tested by sense experience; and the other, accepts that the truth of this kind of religious statement is imaginary, but that is not the problem as far as this kind of truth plays a significant role in human life.

In Thailand, two Buddhist philosopher monks, viz., Somdet Vajirañāna Varorasa and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, are well known for explaining the words of this kind as ultimately referring to what we can observe through sense-experience. For Buddhadasa, hell is a state of human mind; heaven as well.⁶ For him, the truth of religion must be effective with any kind of worldview adopted by a person. Hell and heaven as said above, can be true — even for those who are materialists and do not believe that there is a new life after death. Somdet Vajirañāna Varorasa was the 10th “Pope” of Thai Buddhism. He had written a number of texts widely used in the classical study of Buddhism in Thailand and many are still relevant today. One among them is his well known *The Biography of the Buddha*.⁷ In this book, he treated the Buddha as a human being. Whenever he had to speak about the magical powers of the Buddha, as found in the ancient texts, he always suggested that they should not be understood literally. He said it could be possible that it is the style or tradition of the writing of biography of the Guru generally performed by ancient Indian people including Buddhists to add magical powers to the life of the Guru. The reason why Buddhists should not read and understand this kind of statement as being true for it will concur with the real state of things. It seems that for Somdet Vajirañāna Varorasa Buddhist texts should be treated as historical.

God and Dharma

Generally speaking, Buddhism and Islam differ in that Buddhism is viewed as “non-theistic religion” while Islam a “theistic religion.” This distinction according to Buddhadasa is an illusion. For him, there is one single type of religion in the world — religion as a practice leading to some kind of salvation. In terms of history, God believed by the Muslim is the same as believed by the Christian. And we know that in the tradition of Christianity there are a great number of the attempts done by Christian thinkers to explain, or even prove, that God really exists. Buddhadasa says that a word “God” could have two meanings. One is: God as the Almighty Person. Another is: God as ultimate necessity that can never be avoided as far as human beings need salvation. For him, the second meaning of God share much with the Buddhist understanding of the *Dharma*.⁸

Buddhism and Islam, share the same assumption that there are so many things in the universe that transcend the ability of human sense-experience to perceive. Even science itself tells us that how our sensual-ability is limited. There are so many things that we cannot see or hear while other animals can perceive them. In the case of God, the best way to perceive this thing is thinking and reasoning.

In Buddhism, the Buddha also mentions some necessity. He says, “O monks, if there was not the Unconditioned, liberation of mankind from suffering in this conditioned world will never be possible.”⁹ It is well known that Buddhism teaches about human suffering as the results of ignorance and the cessation of such suffering. Some interpretation of Buddhist teaching claims that Buddhism is a humanist religion in the sense that Buddhists do not need God to liberate themselves from the suffering of life. It may be true that Buddhism does not mention about God. But from the above, we see that the Buddha mentions about something which plays the role to make the liberation of humankind possible. Without this thing, the Buddha says, no one in the world can liberate him/herself from the bondage of the universe, called in Buddhism as the *Samsara*. Actually, Buddhists believe that there are gods — but as our role as humans is to strive towards the elimination of suffering — reverence towards some deity is not conducive towards that aspiration, and may actually inhibit the cessation of suffering, so Buddhists do not have a role for deities, or interactions with them, in everyday life. According to Theravada Buddhist tradition, Brahma instigated the Buddha to begin teaching, however, psychologically speaking, this could have been “the voice” of the existing conservative tradition speaking — to teach the recently-unraveled Dharma for the benefit of a society that was entrenched with many false-views, corrected by the Buddha’s Dharma.

In Buddhism, a concept of *Dharma* plays a very significant role. The *Dharma* means natural things and natural laws. The whole universe is referred to by Buddhism as the *Dharma*. Things in the universe are divided into two main categories. The first one is the law, and the second one is the thing that follows the law. For example, a tree is natural thing in the sense that it happens in this world naturally. This tree is not free in the sense that its life will be determined by the law of nature, which in this context is biological law. Although — environmentally, a seed must fall in the proper place to receive the necessary conditions and blend of temperature, soil and water — to begin germination and continued growth. Buddhism teaches that there are five kinds of natural law in the universe. The first law is the law of heat, which could be compared to physical and chemical laws in modern science. The role of this law is to regulate non-living objects in the universe. The second law is the law of seed, which could be compared to biological law. The role of this law is to regulate living organisms in the universe. The third law is the law of *Karma*. This law has its primary duty to provide a person who performs moral actions with an appropriate result. The fourth law is the law of mind. This law plays the role in regulating human minds and the minds of other sentient beings such as animals and the *devata* (angel/jinn). And the fifth law is the law of *Dharma*. This law is the most significant and its functions are so wide. Any event in the universe that cannot be

explained by the first four laws is believed to follow this law. So, it can be said that the statement of the Buddha which refers to the Unconditioned as the necessary condition for the liberation from suffering might be well understood through the *law of Dharma*. The Unconditioned is natural entity in the sense that it exists in the universe naturally. It could be compared to the shadow of the tree. When a person walks in sunlight and feels unhappy, the shadow of the tree is needed to reduce suffering from the heat of sunlight. The escape from the heat of sunlight cannot be possible without the shadow of the tree. In the same way, the escape from the bondage of life cannot be possible without the existence of the Unconditioned. The relation between the cessation of suffering and the existence of the Unconditioned is provided by the *law of Dharma*. In short, the *law of Dharma* is a kind of natural entity which plays the role as the law or the regulator of things in the universe. The Unconditioned, as well, is a kind of natural entity; but it differs from the law of *Dharma* in that it is not the law but the entity which has to follow the law of *Dharma*.

In philosophy of language, we know that sometimes two different words denote the same thing. For example, we have two words: one is “morning star” and the other is “evening star.” The first one means the star that we see at the eastern sky in the morning before sunrise. The second one means the star that we see at the western sky in the evening after sunset. But these two words denote the same natural object: the planet Venus. At the level of word, these two terms are not the same. But at the level of reality, they are the same.

From above, the meaning of word consists of two levels which are the level of word itself and the level of reality or truth. In Buddhism and Islam, we have sets of words, which are different, as follows:

Islam	Buddhism
God	The Five Laws of Nature

At word-level, these terms are different; but the question is: at the level of truth how do we consider these terms? The answer for this question depends much on our basic assumption about the nature of religion in the world. For Buddhadasa, religion is nothing but an attempt by human beings to seek appropriate salvation for themselves. In the case of Islam, salvation without God-consciousness cannot be possible. As well, in the case of Buddhism salvation, or the release from suffering, cannot be possible without the Unconditioned. However, in some Buddhist circles it is believed that it is the non-arising, or extinction of greed, hatred and delusion — which allows for liberation from suffering . . . where, the mind must manipulate (in the sense of training) the interpretation of the reception of stimuli to the extent that one is not swayed away from mental-equanimity. In a sense, there is the necessary “conditioned-element” — the object/subject exuding aspects of itself to be received by the individual-mind. Here,

liberation is the escape from conditions — where the mind is able to become unresponsive or uninfluenced from such imposing-conditions, although it is not Unconditioned, because of the conditioning it has received from training. It is clear that both Islam and Buddhism share the idea that human beings alone cannot create a thing called: “salvation.” At this stage, we would find that the distinction between a humanist religion and a theist one, if these terms refer to Buddhism (humanist religion) and Islam (theist religion), seems meaningless as both of them accept the same broadly-defined truth that humankind needs something to attain salvation.

The Buddha’s Opinion Concerning God

In a *Sutra* named the *Tevijja Sutra*,¹⁰ the Buddha mentions “God”: One time, two young Brahmins had a conflict, each insisting: “the religious way provided by my teacher only leads to true salvation.” Salvation, as meant by these young Brahmins, is the fellowship with *Brahma*. They could not convince each other, so, they decided to see the Buddha and asked him who was correct between them. The Buddha responded: “is there anyone among the Brahmins who has seen the *Brahma* with his eye.” The young Brahmins answered: “No.” So, the Buddha suggested that “before we try to attain some goal in life, we must know clearly what is it that we seek.” And then the Buddha explained to them what should be understood as the real *Brahma*.

The very old traditional interpretation of this *Sutra*, as found in Buddhist countries like Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, is inclined to suggest — clearly, that the Buddha rejects the existence of God. For the scholars who read this *Sutra* like this, the following are the arguments used by the Buddha.

1. Anything that we cannot perceive by our sense experience does not really exist.
2. The *Brahma* (the Creator of the universe) cannot be perceived by anybody among the Brahmins.
3. So, the *Brahma* does not really exist.

The modern interpretation, mine for example: does not say that the Buddha rejects the existence of God. We know that in Buddhism something that cannot be perceived by sense-experience can be accepted as really existing. *Nirvana* in some Buddhist teachings, in some aspects can be compared with God although it would be more-accurate to link the concept to “dwelling in voidness beyond-heaven”; or as if the individual was, for oneself — the God, as both terms refer to something that transcends human sense experience. So, it is not valid to use sense-experience as the grounds to reject the existence of God. If we insist to use, we must use it to examine the existence of *Nirvana* as well, to be fair.

According to me, the following are Buddha’s arguments.

1. Before we seek something as the goal of life, we should know clearly what it is.
2. Sometimes the highest goal of life will not be disclosed until we have completed the required practice. In this case, what we should do is something seen rationally appropriate or needed, to attain the goal.

3. *Brahma* as the highest goal of life must be the pure state. So, to be a fellow with the *Brahma*, a person must purify his or her life.
4. Through the purification of life from every kind of defilement, a person is able to attain the world of Brahma.

Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore wrote in their poems that God would manifest when a person does something to another, with love. For a person who never shares any suffering with human fellows, God will never be disclosed even though he or she regularly offers prayer in the temple. For the Buddha, even though we do not see “God” we still can imagine that “God” must be the “Being” — that cares for suffering of humankind. So, a person who cares for the suffering of another, sees “God.” It should be noted that in the *Tevijja Sutra* the Buddha mentions that the practice to be a follower of *Brahma* is “love and sympathy” which called in Pali as: *metta*. We know, further, that the *Bodhisattva* in Buddhism, a being in a process of practice to be the Buddha in the future, is the person who extremely cares for suffering of others.

The Holy Minds of the Masters and Later Development of Religions

Religious conflicts usually happen after the passage of the masters. It may be useful to come back to the masters and learn from their sayings and actions to live peacefully among the varieties of religious dogmas in our age. As a Buddhist, I see from the Buddhist holy texts that the Buddha, as a master, has many friends who adopted different religious faiths; but, that is not a problem. For me, being the master of religion means the transcendence from the illusions of the forms of belief. Islam and Buddhism, as two types of belief, have many differences, starting from the most basic belief concerning Islam’s God and Buddhism’s Laws of Nature — and other significant distinctions. However, these differences could be viewed like the difference between “the morning star” and “the evening star” that we have considered previously.

Normally, different names that refer to the same thing ultimately are different because they are created in different place, time, surrounding conditions, culture, collective knowledge, belief of the community, and so on. Buddhism was created in one place with a number of things stated above; Islam as well. As the masters of religions are believed to transcend the illusions of things, the language used by the masters to communicate their teachings or ideas might be understood by the masters themselves as a temporary tool. The Buddha himself many times said to his followers that he fully knew that words used in the community were the creations adopted by social convention and many times these words did not convey exact meaning as meant by him, however he still used these words like other people in the community but utilized conventional-speech under his personal awareness that he knew its limitation and temporality.

In Zen Buddhism, words are usually compared to the finger that points at the moon. The function of language according to Zen is pointing at reality. This understanding of language in Zen teaching is a result of observation that sometimes people cannot free

themselves from the negative influence of language. Imagine a stranger says to the villagers, "Look at the full moon sir. It's very beautiful." Some of them say to the man, "Oh, your finger is so ugly." The man does not reply, just going away. After that the villagers start to discuss about the ugly finger of the man. However, one person among them does not join the discussion. He leaves them, walking alone and looking at the full moon. "Thanks," he says to the owner of ugly finger who has now gone away.

In terms of religion, sometimes people do not listen to some useful words just because "they are not the finger of my master." According to Zen, it does not matter where the words come from, or which source — if they can point to the useful truth, why do not accept them! Buddhadasa once said, "There are so many words in the Bible which Buddhists should utilize." I believe this saying applies to the Qur'an as well. Muslims and Christians should look at the Buddhist Canon in the same way.

As I have stated above, the truth of religion consists of two kinds: the first is empirical truth and the second is mystic truth. Empirical truth can be verified by sense experience. I believe that in Buddhism and Islam we can find this kind of truth everywhere in the texts and in the practices of the believers of both religions. The truth of empirical statement is necessary truth in the sense that we can never deny it. For example, a Buddhist or a Muslim feels that his or her friends were treated unjustly by government officers and thus, helps them through the way of wisdom and non-violence. Eventually, their friends were successful and got justice. This is the state of happiness. The truth that happiness that comes from the feeling of friendship will cause the feeling that our life has meaning and is not empty — becomes self-evident, and this kind of truth can be found both in Buddhist and Muslim communities.

Two years ago, Thai society faced a tragic political-crisis caused by the conflict between supporters or opponents of an ex-prime minister of our country whose name I shall not mention. The group that protested against the ex-prime minister consisted of Muslims and Buddhists, while there is no evidence showing that there were the Muslims in the group that supported the ex-prime minister. The southern part of Thailand is well known as the region where Islam predominates. Thai Muslims in the southern region of Thailand are sensitive to political and social issues and despise corruption or injustice in the community. The ex-prime minister mentioned above was accused of corruption — the well-known fact as the cause of the conflict among Thai people is: this ex-prime minister sold his property valued 73,000 million baht to a Singaporean fund without paying the tax, because of a loophole in the law created between the time he gained a government concession and the time before he sold. Many Thai people feel that as a prime minister of the country, he should not use any loophole to avoid paying tax because he is the prime minister. He should be the exemplar of moral person for the people in the country. Denying to pay this tax was viewed as selfishness; and unfair to ordinary people who willingly or unwillingly pay tax. Those who protest against him think of the moral-issue while those who support him think only of the legality in the strict sense. Normally, Muslims and Buddhists in Thailand have not much of a chance to live together and do something in common,

with the same aim, as found in these citizens protesting against the ex-prime minister. This group, generally known the “yellow shirt” people, is still active. It is interesting that during the last long protest of 193 days, the leaders of the protest who are all Buddhists were strictly protected by young Muslim guards. A Buddhist monk who played the significant role as the moral advisor of the protesting group said to me that after the protest, he continues to this very day to be invited by Muslim communities to visit and have conversations. Generally, it seems difficult to see a Buddhist monk in the Muslim community in Thailand; but it has already happened. During the protest, a religious program was set up. It should be noted that when there are dialogues between Buddhism and Islam — the speakers of both religions seem to stress the spirit of their own religions as meant by the masters. For them, the spirit of Buddhism and Islam is moral-cleanliness. Religion is not personal matter only, but it is social obligation to not allow evils from happening in our country.

Religious bias usually leads to religious conflict and war at the end. In terms of sociology, religious bias or the narrow-mindedness in religion is something worth studying. My personal belief now about the nature of religion and the root of religious bias is that: the best religion is knowing each other and sharing a feeling of suffering and hope. During the past decade, there was an attempt by a group of Buddhists in Thailand to declare Buddhism to be the “state religion” for a new constitution. From a personal conversation with some leaders of this group, they told me that one thing that motivates them try to make Buddhism the state religion is a perception that Muslims in Thailand may do something that could harm Buddhism. When I asked, “Would you give an example of the events that cause such a feeling,” they referred to an event which I myself best know. Some years ago, a Muslim leader in Bangkok sent a letter to the minister of education to reconsider the phrase: “Buddhism as national religion” — which regularly appears in the religion-textbooks used in public schools — should this be changed? For him, there are at least five religions in Thai society: Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and Hinduism. Historically, some of these traditions pre-arrived Theravada Buddhism in the nation. It seems not fair to other religions if such a claim remains in textbooks. Actually every religion should be equally nationalized. The King of Thailand is also the upholder of all religions, though, a Buddhist. When this letter was known amongst Buddhists, some of them felt that this could be a kind of invasion upon Buddhism and they could not keep silent.

In modern Thailand we possess two socially-profound, giant Buddhist scholar-monks: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Payutto Bhikkhu. The former is well known as a liberal Buddhist thinker who proclaimed a long time ago: “One of my religious task as a servant of the Buddha is that I should try to make Buddhists know what the essence of Buddhism is, and make adherents of other religions knowing the same thing in their own religions.” Buddhadasa had a number of friends from other religions: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs — he is internationally famous. For Buddhadasa, if a person from any religion knows the essence of his/her religion, there will be knowledge of another religion’s spirit, automatically — because every religion shares the same spirit.

What is the spirit of all religions in the world in the view of Buddhadasa? It is the transcendence beyond selfishness and other kinds of narrow-mindedness: “When a person has transcended selfishness he/she will not harm anybody in the world,” he argues. On the contrary, a religious person without a selfish mind will be the light of the world. We can find this kind of person in all religions.

Even though the view of Buddhadasa, concerning the universal spirit of religion in the world, could be viewed as simplistic, this understanding seems to provide us with some usefulness. For example, wealth and religion seem to be the enemy of each other: Jesus says that it is not possible for a person to be the slave of God and money at the same time; in Buddhism, at the lower level of morality a person can be the servant of morality and money at the same time — but at higher stages, must choose only one thing. I believe this idea is found in Islam as well, because of the emphasis on financial-charity to the less-fortuned people in society. The accumulation of wealth to be consumed solely by oneself only is never endorsed by any religion in the world. Actually religion does not reject wealth, religion rejects selfishness. If the possession of wealth leads to the happiness of other, for example the poor — there is no reason for religion to reject such wealth.

Payutto Bhikkhu seems more conservative when compared with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. His academic interest consists of two main areas: the teaching of Buddhism and the history of world religions. He argues that in Christian and Muslim countries, Christianity and Islam is often the state religion, respectfully; so why can't we have the same in Thailand, where almost 90% of the population are Buddhist.¹¹ In exploring the history of world religions, he suggests that in Christianity and Islam, they have their ancient and modern histories related to violence and harm towards other religions, including Buddhism. The negative aspects of Christianity and Islam pertaining to Buddhism in history are unquestionable. The Buddhist university at Nalanda, in India, was destroyed by the Muslim army. In the Ayutthaya period, Thailand suffered greatly from armed-invasion from Western and Christian countries, and from armed-groups of Muslims from the South. Christian missionaries tried hard to convert Thai kings, but they were not successful with kings who stood firm in their Buddhist faith. So, what is cited by Payutto Bhikkhu is historically true. He uses a method of induction saying that if in the past the Muslims have harmed us, why should they not engage with such events again today?

The concern of Payutto Bhikkhu as said above should be respected. However, the use of history has several objectives. Sometimes, people use history to remember the suffering only. In the past, country *A* dropped an atomic bomb on country *B* causing the deaths of so many people. This is historical fact. For the people of country *B*, the use of this historical fact issues very important questions. Some of them may say, “I will remember it and I will never forgive the person who did this thing to my country.” I personally respect such a memory, especially of those who are innocent victims of the conflict of their leaders. There might be another way to remember this kind of history from the perspective of Buddhism.

There are a number of the Buddha's teachings that can be used to seek the way stated above. The first one is the doctrine of detail analysis, which is called the *vibhajja vada* in Pali. From this doctrinal-point, the Buddha says that when we are confronted with any event especially the one that causes unhappiness, what should be done is to divide the conditions that form such an event and see what is relevant and what is not. In the case of the dropping of the atomic bomb, as said above, the analysis will tell us that it is not all the people of that country involved with this tragic event; so, we cannot say that all the citizens of that country must be held responsible for that action. A number of relevant persons only, are required.

The next doctrine is the selfless doctrine, which is well known as the doctrine of *anatta*. By this doctrine, things in the world are viewed by the Buddha as a set of temporary conditions. The word "country" for example denotes a number of conditions that form a mental picture in our understanding. Actually, there is no country, as one single entity, which remains unchanged over the passing of time. This is the same with other conditioned-categories, namely: "religion."

Using the doctrines as said above when considering the history of Buddhism, Buddhists are advised by the Buddha to understand: it may be true that at one time in the past the University of Nalanda of India was destroyed by the Muslims, but this does not mean that we should ask for the responsibility from today's Muslims because they are not the same people. The Christian missionaries that we see as the invaders of Buddhism during the Ayutthaya-period are not the same Christian-missionaries today. The doctrines of analysis and selfless condition will disclose the hidden illusions of words and make us free from the negative influences caused by the memory of the said sad events. Actually, Buddhism teaches us to look at history no differently from other natural events. Some days the clouds may cause the heavy rain and destroy our house — this sad event can be remembered as part of the history of our suffering if we wish; but this does not mean that we should look at other clouds as the enemy.

One other Buddha's teaching widely known is the doctrine of forgiveness, which is called in Pali: the doctrine of *averam*. Forgiveness in the Buddhist perspective, is not the control of mind to suppress the sad memory; but it is an understanding that time has passed and the conditions that caused the suffering to us, have changed. This doctrine is advised by the Buddha to be used even with one single person. A man kills my son. Even in this kind of case, the Buddha suggests me to forgive the man. With the passage of time, the same man will be the new person. So, the man who killed my son and the man who is forgiven by me are not the same person. The man who killed my son has died but it is my unchanged memory that makes me feel he is the same person and I will not forgive him forever.

It seems that the opinion of Payutto Bhikkhu is preferred by a group of Buddhists over the position of Buddhadasa, and this group of Buddhists is often attempting to lobby the government and the parliament to declare Buddhism as the state religion of Thailand in the next constitution. Recently, the religious committee of the senate house has declared clearly that they will not support any attempt to put Buddhism as the state

religion in the new constitution. This declaration seems to be the falling curtain that closes a religious cold war drama in Thai society, in which, at one side the actors are a group of Buddhist-fundamentalists and imaginary-another side are believed by the advocates to be Muslim.

Looking to the Future

Thai society never had violent conflicts between religions. Credit should be given to all religions that form Thai community as a whole. Buddhists and Muslims have different identities and these differences do not need to change. In my lecture room at the university, I have noticed some lovely identities of my students who are from different religions. My Muslim students, especially females, seem to be the people that have very little problem with the university's dress-code. Thai universities mandate that students wear its uniform; and the standard university uniform is usually viewed by the students as not sexually attractive — so, they actually dress as they want and this causes headaches to the university.

Even though mere dressing cannot point out if a person is good or bad, the youth of the country should have some social guidance-system to educate them — meaning: life needs rules. In Hinduism, human life is divided into four stages and each stage has its own proper rules. In the West, a concept of personal freedom plays a major role widely in society, all levels of students have the personal freedom to dress as they desire as far as it does not harm or is not explicitly offensive to another. Personal freedom is a philosophical concept; and looking at this from the perspective of religion, this kind of concept is worldly — in the sense that it does not require thinking beyond the area of reason. Religious thinking usually teaches us to donate something to the community. Ideally, religious girls are expected to dress properly; and this can be explained as a kind of donation to society. They donate beautiful-order to the community like the flowers donate their beauty to the world.

My Buddhist students, who form the majority, seem to be of the liberal minds. Once I asked them, “Should Buddhism be declared the state religion in the constitution?” (I referred to the related event as said above before asking the question.) Most of them answered, “No”! When I asked for the reason, they said, “Because it's not fair to other religions.” I believe that this kind of answer shares much with what John Stuart Mill says in his book, *On Liberty*. Sometimes people understand that in democratic society the voice of majority wins everything. If the majority of Thai people who are Buddhist need Buddhism to be the state religion, it must be so because it is the voice of majority. This kind of reasoning does not accord with the spirit of democracy. Actually, Mill tries to defend personal liberty of the minority in the above work. He says the society can limit personal freedom only in the case that such freedom harms other in the community. In Thai society, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and others form the minority reaching about 10%. One of their personal liberties is the liberty to have religious faiths that are equally accepted by the state. As soon as Buddhism is adopted to be the state religion,

this liberty will be violated; and this cannot be done in the view of Mill because the minorities have a valid liberty. It seems that my Buddhist students in my philosophy class understand that we fully have what Mills proposes present in Buddhism.

Rules and freedom are sometimes understood in contradiction. If you accept to follow the rules especially the religious ones, it seems that you do not think that freedom is of significance. Buddhist laypersons have very little religious rules to follow, when comparing them to Muslims. Actually alcoholic drinks such as beer, wine, whisky, and so on are prohibited according to the Buddhist Fifth Precept — but alcoholic beverages are freely sold and consumed in Thailand. This happens as a result of the traditional Thai understanding of Buddhism which states that the practice of religion is personal matter and we cannot use personal matter to limit freedom of others in the community. If you consider alcoholic drink an evil and do not drink yourself — this is good. But you cannot prevent others, who consider this matter differently, from drinking, by law.

I myself have observed this line of interpretation for decades. Long time ago, western Buddhist scholars, like Winston L. King, suggested that Buddhist society does not have social ethics.¹² Social ethics in this context means an ethical view which says that for the benefit of society sometimes personal freedom must be limited. I think the view of King is still valid today, looking mainly from what is happening in Thai society. Some scholars of Buddhism, after hearing that Buddhism does not have the social ethics, may say, “That is not the problem as far as we have good persons in the community.” For them, if all the members of society are good, any social rules are not necessary. Buddhism tries to teach individuals in the community to be good persons; and the reason for this is: if we have good individuals in the community, the community as a whole will be good automatically. It seems that this line of interpretation of Buddhist teaching does not conform to the doctrinal-teaching of mutually arising of things taught by the Buddha — in Pali, *paticca-samuppada*. Waters from the ocean, being burnt by the sun, form the clouds in the sky. The clouds produce the rain. The rain falls into the ocean again. So the relation between the ocean and the clouds are mutually related, meaning that the ocean needs the clouds to make the rains and fall into the ocean. Without the clouds, in theory the ocean can be extinct. Or we can imagine that at the beginning of the world there were the clouds first, the ocean are the result of the rain from the clouds. As well, the clouds need the ocean. Without the ocean, the clouds can never be formed.

Individuals and the society could be compared to the clouds and the ocean. The Buddha says that human nature is inclined to fall into the evil more than to go up to the good like water that falls to a lower place from the high. So, it might be very difficult to have all members of community who are totally good. But that is not a problem as far as we have some good people and the community has chosen them to act on behalf of the community. The community can be ruled by the minority of good persons. The rules set up by the good minority will act to prevent the bad majority from doing the evils. In this sense the rules of the community play the role of producing good members of the community. Without law, our society might be in a state of chaos. Law is the tool of the community. Good law supports having good individuals in the community.

In the Muslim community, law and religious teaching are not separated. But in Buddhist community, religious teaching have little influences on law, as found in the case above — the free selling of alcoholic drinks. In some situations, I agree that the law of state can and should be free from an influence of religious teaching. But in some situation, it seems that we need religious teaching to be the grounds of law because religious teaching has some properties that cannot be found in normal reasoning — which is the grounds for secular law. For example: consenting adult prostitution, that does not harm any person in the community, should be allowed by law. Normal reasoning might not be able to give a reason why the law should not allow this kind of activity; but thinking from the perspective of religion, it could be possible to consider this kind of prostitution in different ways. Buddhism teaches much about the values of human beings in terms of things that cannot be sold for money. Under this light of understanding, it may be true that a girl is willing to be a prostitute, and she has no any related persons to suffer from her decision; but looking inside herself alone we would see that ultimately she is a human being in the sense that she is not an object to be sold for the money. The community should protect her from the harm, done to her by herself.

Doing harm to oneself is widely discussed in social philosophy. I have given the criteria to judge this problem from the perspective of Theravada Buddhism in a previous research project named *The Relationship between Morality and Law in Theravada Buddhism's View*.¹³ This research project was done as I felt that Thai society needs inspirational social philosophy from Buddhism. During the passing decades, there were a number of studies showing that how much bad things, according to Buddhist teachings, harm our society. These things, for example: alcoholic drinks, are legal — as the state understands that we are living in a free country. Being a free country sometimes means people have freedom to be personally immoral, considering religious perspectives. Islamic communities are well known as not being free communities in the above meaning. At this point, I think Buddhism has something to learn from Islam.

But, as history shows, many times religiously-blind dogmas gave rise to violence and violations of personal freedom. Buddhism teaches about a middle way — a practice which does not follow extreme approaches. It seems that the separation between the Church and State as practiced in some countries in the world is considered by Buddhism as a kind of extreme. In the same way, the attempt to make the entire country to be religious community is also considered by Buddhism as another kind of extreme. I think this middle approach of Buddhism should be learned by Islam and other religions in the world. My personal belief now is: the masters of all religions might be of not extreme minds — the extreme practices of religion usually happen after the passing of the masters. The corruption of religious teaching usually results in extreme practices; and these extreme practices usually harm innocent people.

Recently, I have completed a research project concerning the view of Buddhism on the cloning of human beings and the use of human embryonic stem cells for medical purposes. Modern biomedical issues need human wisdom from any areas because they contain the very big questions about human nature and the destiny of our community.

While undertaking the research, I have felt that the serious moral issues in our community needed cautious methodology. Even older issues, like: homosexuality and prostitution, still need a new perspective. I understand that the middle approach suggested by the Buddha covers the awareness that our study has not completed yet, even though the project has been closed. I am not sure if the law in the Muslim community can be changed when a newer study of religious faiths suggests something differently from the past; but in Buddhist community, this thing is possible.

I understand that happiness of personal and social life is the objective of all religions in the world. Between these two things, the happiness of personal life might be easier to attain as it depends on only one person. Even in jail, a person can have personal happiness of mind — if he/she learns how to find it. The happiness of society-life is more difficult to attain as it is related to a person and the surrounding conditions. In some community a majority of people will feel happy when a minority follows the moral standards adopted by the majority. Homosexual people are minority in our community. Many times we, the majority, feel happy when these, our homosexual fellows, behave as we want them to do; but our social happiness causes stress in the souls of our homosexual fellows. How do we deal with this conflict? We need wisdom, love, and tenderness of mind to find the answer.

Basically, Islamic ethics is mainly based on a *conscientious social-tradition* while the ethics of Buddhism is *personality-based*. Considering from this perspective, we can say that the two religions have different experiences that can and should be mutually exchanged. The dialogue between religions does not necessarily result in the adjustment of one's own standpoint. Homosexuality is not a moral problem in Buddhist lay-community, while it is the problem in Muslim community. From this, we can merely say that both communities have the different approaches to the same phenomenon. Religious dialogue for this case in my perspective has nothing to do with an attempt to find which one among two is right. On the contrary, dialogue means carefully listening to the different voices and trying to understand why our friends have such principles. My Muslim students seem to tolerate homosexuality, and the reason may be they are Muslims amongst Buddhist friends. Islamic law, in general, is not used in Thailand except some parts in the South where the interaction between Buddhists and Muslims is limited. My Muslim friends in Bangkok seem not worried about the fact that Islamic law is not used as said. The reason may be the same as the case of the students above — they are Muslims amongst Buddhist friends.

Endnotes

1. I thank my former student: Dr. Dion Peoples, for making minor remarks on a draft-version of this article. I served as his thesis-advisor for his Master of Arts in Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University; he has since moved onwards to earn his PhD from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University recently (2009) in Buddhist Studies, and also has a serious academic interest in Islam. Prior to attending Chulalongkorn University, he was ordained as a Buddhist monk. And I thank Dr. Imtiyaz Yusuf, for editing the article.

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Buddhism in a Muslim State: Theravada Practices and Religious Life in Kelantan

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Introduction

Kelantan, an administrative state of Malaysia, is located to the south of Narathiwat province of Thailand. Although its population is predominantly Malay, Kelantan is also known for a number of Siamese settlements, particularly in the rural areas. In fact, despite the label given to the state as the corridor of Mecca (*serambi Mekah*) and as the bastion of Malay culture, Kelantan is home to some twenty Buddhist temples together with a number of Buddha statues, including a reclining Buddha image claimed to be one of the biggest in Southeast Asia. The existence of Buddhist temples in the midst of an orthodox Malay society seems to be a dilemma in itself, but further investigation shows that Buddhism and Islam can coexist within the same social and cultural sphere without leading to intense religious and ethnic conflict.

The aim of this article is to highlight some of the factors that have made it possible for Buddhism to operate in a Muslim setting, particularly in a social and cultural environment often associated with Islamic fundamentalism. Despite being a minority religion, Buddhism has not only survived in Kelantan, but has also flourished in many other ways. The argument here is that although Islam is often associated with radicalism, and lately with terrorism, it has never been actually perceived as a threat to the very persistence and continuity of Buddhism in this part of the country. As seen in the case of Kelantan, the two religious traditions have a long history of coexistence dating back many centuries, often with one informing the other in terms of belief elements and ritual interpretations.

The interplay of two different religious traditions in a social and cultural setting dominated by one religion can be of theoretical interest since it gives some insights into the process of adaptation on the part of the minority group on one side, and the acceptance of a minority religion by the dominant group. Buddhism has to come to terms not only with the fact that it is a religion adhered to by a minority population; it also has to address itself to the question of making the local interpretation of the religion relevant in a social and cultural context that otherwise has potential for conflicts and hostilities. While the Malays in general may not be directly supportive of Buddhism, they

nevertheless appear to be quite tolerant of the presence of temples and monks in their immediate neighborhood.

At the structural level Buddhism has established itself in Kelantan due to some historical antecedents. It is further strengthened by the protection it receives under the freedom of religious practice guaranteed under the country's modern day constitution. At the interpersonal level, Buddhism with its retinue of monks and temples does have some relevance to the local Malay Muslim population to the extent that they indicate a good measure of cross-cultural borrowings on both sides of the religious and ethnic divide.

This article consists of two parts. The first part gives a general picture of the Siamese and the practice of Theravada Buddhism in Kelantan. In this respect, it is important to emphasize here that Buddhism has always been a marker for the Siamese¹ ethnic group. It will be argued that the very survival and persistence of Buddhism in Kelantan depends on the role the Siamese play as the custodian of the religion. The second part will look at various ways Theravada Buddhism adapts itself to the local context by resorting to various mechanisms to ensure its persistence and continuity. One of these is by taking a non-antagonistic stand towards Islam, typically by subscribing to Malay symbolism and by making no deliberate effort to proselytize Buddhism to Muslim Malays.

The Siamese of Kelantan

The Siamese of Kelantan constitute about one percent of the state population.² Unlike other immigrant ethnic groups, they established themselves in Kelantan long before the mass arrival of Chinese and Indian immigrants in the early part of the twentieth century. Second, the Siamese are rural dwellers in contrast to the Chinese, who are more inclined to live in urban areas. Written records concerning the establishment of Siamese villages in Kelantan are not readily available and the dates of their foundation still remain a matter of speculation. However, oral traditions indicate that many of these settlements are over 100 years old. In fact, in some places, Siamese villages are known to predate their Malay neighbors.

It appears that the migration of Siamese settlers before the present century from southern provinces of Thailand was a regular occurrence. Obviously the prevailing social and political circumstances of the period helped to facilitate the migration, since Kelantan was then a vassal state of Thailand.³ Hence, the reality of *présence siamoise* has to some extent been responsible in terms of mellowing down open hostility or resistance on the part of the local Malays, if any, towards the sporadic migration of the Siamese into Kelantan river plain in search of new lands.

That the Siamese faced no Malay objection is also attributable to the fact that they did not actually compete with the Malays, since they chose to settle in areas that were originally covered with jungles or swamps. There is also strong evidence to suggest that local Malay chieftains actually encouraged the Siamese to settle in their respective territories, especially in places where the original population had relocated elsewhere.

Apart from that the Siamese occupy a special category in the ethnic classification of the indigenous population of Kelantan. Because they have established themselves in Kelantan since “immemorial time,” the state recognizes them as almost similar to the indigenous Malays with regard to many administrative matters, in particular, with issues of land ownership in areas designated as Malay reserves.⁴ Other special privileges given to them include participation in government sponsored investment schemes, *Amanah Sabam Bumiputera* and *Amanah Sabam Nasional*, normally reserved for Malaysians of indigenous status (*bumiputera*).

The question of Siamese political status in the wake of Malayan independence has been addressed by Roger Kershaw in great length.⁵ The issues raised by Kershaw reflect the kind of anxiety experienced by the Siamese during the period after independence. There have definitely been some uncertainties regarding the granting of citizenship status to the Siamese, the mechanism of which was often misunderstood and left to the discretion of local registration officers. Although they were never accorded *bumiputera* status *per se*, the Siamese were nevertheless recognized as “native of Kelantan,” especially for the purposes of “land transmission in general” in accordance with the Land Enactment Act of 1938.⁶ The question of citizenship after independence was never a real issue insofar as the Siamese were concerned, since federal citizenship was eventually extended to most of them.

Theravada Buddhism in Kelantan

Two features best describe Theravada Buddhism in Kelantan. It is basically a rural phenomenon because nearly all Buddhist temples in Kelantan are located in rural areas.⁷ Second, since temples are normally located in Siamese settlements, or in villages where the Siamese form the bulk of the population, Theravada Buddhism tends to assume Siamese characteristics and forms, not only in ritual content but also in other tangible forms such as the architectural style of temple buildings. Apart from that nearly all monks who serve for a long-term period, and those who become abbot, are Siamese with the exception of one or two. Hence, leadership of the state *Sangha* is dominated and controlled by Siamese monks. Even in villages whose entire population is ethnically Chinese, the structure of temple rituals are also predominantly Siamese, while the resident monks are most likely to be Siamese, either seconded from other temples in Kelantan or “imported” from Thailand.

In the wider context of Malaysian society, where religion often forms the basis of ethnic differentiation, perhaps it is not an understatement to say that Buddhism, especially of the Theravada kind, underscores and defines Siamese ethnicity in the same way Islam is to Malays. As I have mentioned elsewhere, Buddhist temples are not only symbolically important to the Siamese but Theravada Buddhism in particular defines what Siamese ethnicity is all about. Hence, the Siamese will go to great lengths to ensure that the monastic institutions continue to survive. Some of the more traditional functions of the temple may no longer exist, but its role in underscoring Siamese ethnicity remains

crucial if not deliberately overemphasized. It is in this sense that monastic institution may have been instrumental in strengthening the ethnic identity of the Siamese in the context of a multiethnic society.⁸

While Buddhism is recognized as the state religion in Thailand, in Kelantan its position is surpassed by the status accorded to Islam as the official religion of the country. Hence, the organization of Buddhism in Kelantan takes place within a very specialized context, in an environment dominated by another religion. For instance, certain Buddhist rituals have been selectively modified to suit local cultural constraints, including re-scheduling of temple events to suit the non-Buddhist calendar as well as to take advantage of Muslim public holidays.⁹

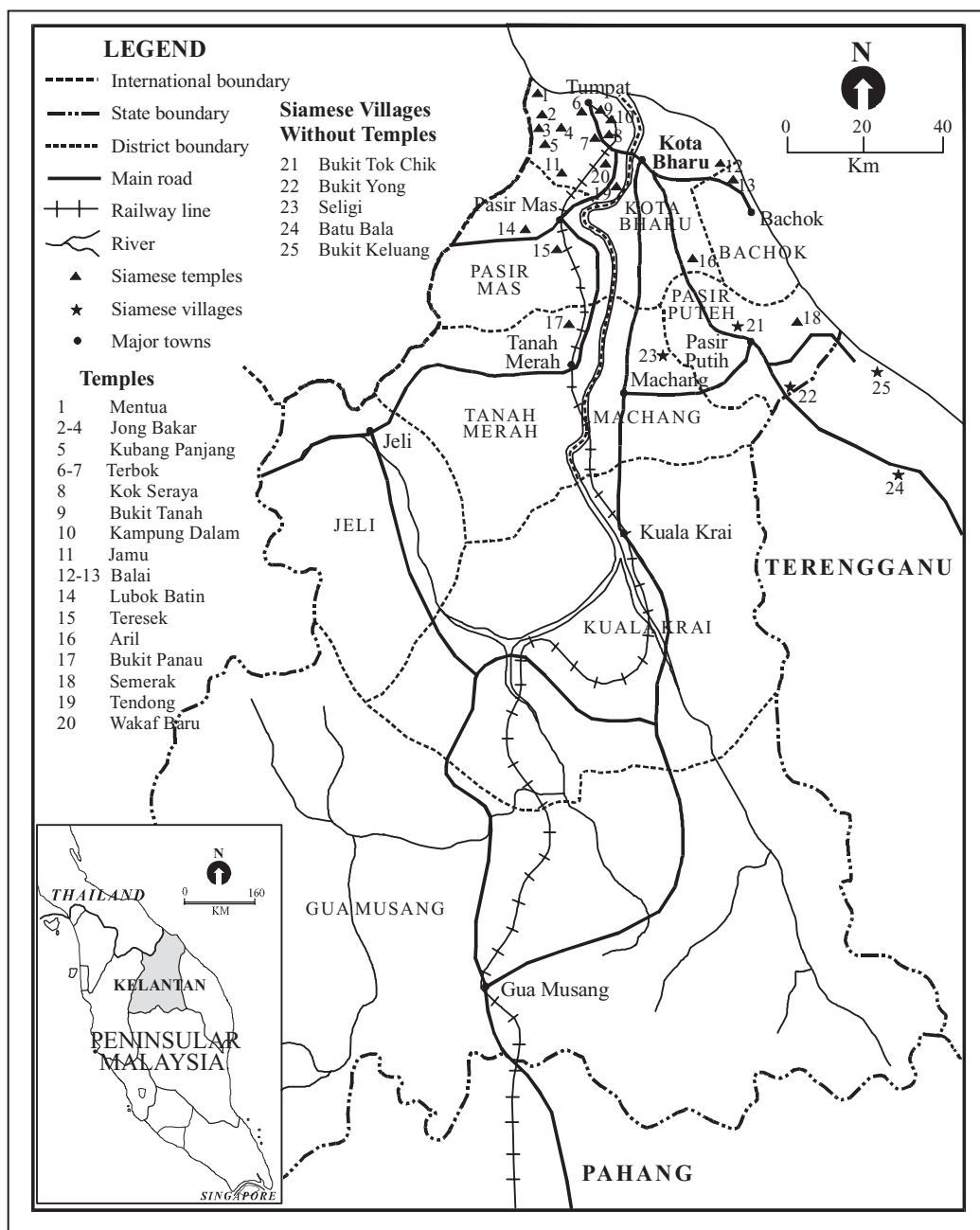
Another complexity related to Siamese Buddhism in Kelantan is the fact that it also tolerates certain elements of Chinese religion. For instance, Siamese temples with a large number of Chinese supporters recognize the importance of Chinese deities including the goddess *Kuan Yin* and *Tua Pek Kong*. In some temples images of these deities are often given a respectable place although they are not necessarily erected at the most strategic location within the monastic compound. By accommodating the religious need of the Chinese, these temples are guaranteed their continuous support, even if these Chinese worshippers only come to pay homage to their respective deities.

Collectively, Buddhist temples in Kelantan form part of the larger social and religious network that covers not only the state, but also southern Thailand and northern Terengganu (Map 1). If we consider the export of monks from Kelantan to serve Buddhist followers in other places in peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, then the network accounts for a much bigger area. The only thing is that they also have to compete with monks who originate from temples in other parts of the country, typically those from Kedah, Perlis and Penang, or, for that matter, monks from Sri Lanka and the Indian Sub-continent.

Buddhist temples in Kelantan come under the jurisdiction of the chief monk of Kelantan, whose official title in Malay is *Ketua Besar Sami Budha Negeri Kelantan*. This title is informally known as *chao khun*, although the official one would have appropriately been *caw khana rat*. Serving under the *chao khun* are four ecclesiastical district heads known as *chao khana amphoe* who are responsible for a number of temples in their respective district. These religious districts do not necessarily coincide with government administrative districts (*jajaban* in Malay). As such, in a district with a large number of temples such as Tumpat, there are two positions of ecclesiastical heads. In districts where there is a single temple or two, the positions of *caw khana amphoe* are collapsed into one. For instance, temples in the districts of Bachok, Pasir Puteh and Kota Bharu come under the jurisdiction of only one ecclesiastical district head.

Local Adaptation of Siamese Buddhism

Buddhist temples in Kelantan have developed various strategies in order to survive as a minority religion. First, as a matter of prime consideration, the *Sangha* organization



Map 1. Siamese Settlements and Temples in Kelantan and Terengganu

of Kelantan takes a non-confrontational stand against the majority population, which is predominantly Muslim. At the structural level the *Sangha* formally acknowledges the patronage of a Muslim ruler as the protector of the religion. At the interpersonal level Siamese monks and specialists are often approached by Malays for assistance in the realm of magic and traditional healings. Second, the survival of Buddhism is related to the continuous support it receives from the local Chinese community. Hence, Chinese money helps to support temple expenses and defray the cost of the construction of monastic buildings. Third, there exists a close relationship between the *Sangha* body of Thailand and that of Kelantan. This means that the latter could always rely on the former for reference in matters related to the corpus of religious knowledge and the conduct of rites and ceremonies. In fact, the *Sangha* of Thailand has always been the source of scholarly and religious reference for Kelantanese monks.

Patronage of a Muslim Ruler

The formal Buddhist ecclesiastical organization of Kelantan recognizes the Sultan of Kelantan, a Muslim ruler, as its symbolic patron and protector. This arrangement can be traced back to the historical past when Kelantan was a vassal state of Thailand, during which local rulers were expected to look after the interests of Siamese Buddhist subjects.

Officially, the appointment of *Sangha* head of the state has to be endorsed by the Sultan. Since the ruler is a Muslim, the endorsement is merely symbolic but the implication it carries is very significant insofar as it gives some kind of political and social legitimacy to the *Sangha* body, perhaps in a format quite similar to that of Thailand. Hence, letters of credential from the palace in Kota Bharu are issued every time a new chief monk is appointed, although the ceremony nowadays may not be as elaborate as it used to be.

This procedure illustrates the kind of accommodation the Siamese of Kelantan have made in the absence of a real Buddhist king. Thus, a Muslim ruler has been able to lend a “transcendental” dimension as the protector of the Buddhist religion (*phutthasasanu pathampok*).

This particular relationship between a Muslim ruler and the *Sangha* at first appears rather strange. Yet it is not actually in conflict with Buddhist doctrine as it conforms to early developments of Buddhism in India, when it enjoyed the royal protection of King Asoka. This kind of structural model involving state-*Sangha* relationship has been discussed by S. J. Tambiah¹⁰ and may be useful in looking at the case in Kelantan. At the very outset the position of the king in relation to the *Sangha* is clearly defined and his role as protector of the religion entails no interference in internal affairs of the religion. As emphasized by Tambiah, while being an integral part of the religious hierarchy, the ruler is not *in* the religion. In fact, having a Muslim as the patron works to the advantage of Kelantanese Sangha. In this regard, Buddhism in Kelantan is vested with relatively greater freedom compared with the case of Thailand, since the Muslim ruler does not

interfere in the domestic affairs of the *Sangha*, nor does he go around visiting temples and scrutinize every aspect of temple business.

Under the present set up, temples do receive some tangible benefits from the state. Temple land is exempted from paying land taxes as it is classified similar to *tanah wakaf* (land dedicated for religious and charity purposes). Other than the special exemption, neither the temple nor the *Sangha* receives other direct benefits from the state. Senior monks holding administrative posts in the *Sangha* do not receive any allowance from the state in the manner Thai monks enjoy their *nittayaphat* allowance.

In the case of Kelantan *Sangha*, it is out of this special relationship with the Muslim ruler that Buddhism has managed to draw the strength for its very persistence and continuity amidst the larger Malay Muslim society. With the ruler acting as its symbolic protector, Buddhism and those who profess the religion are assured of a legitimate existence even though their activities may be confined and limited to Siamese villages and temple grounds. The royal patronage also means that the Muslim Malays have to bear with the presence of the Siamese and the establishment of Buddhist temples in their immediate neighborhood.¹¹

Having the ruler as the patron of Buddhist religion in Kelantan does not mean that the religion also has the liberty of spreading the faith indiscriminately to just any ethnic group. Far from that, there seems to be a general understanding that Buddhism should be restricted to the Siamese and other non-Malay ethnic groups. As such, there is no concerted effort on the part of the Buddhist clergy to proselytize their religion to their immediate Muslim neighbors, in stark contrast with their intensive and deliberate efforts aimed at the Chinese. It appears that the Buddhist clergy recognizes the ethnic boundary and social limitation when it comes to propagating the religion. Obviously, the Malays are excluded as the main target of Buddhist missionary activities for the sake of avoiding unnecessary strain in the relationship between neighboring Malay and Siamese communities.

But the real opposition to the attempt at spreading Buddhism among Malays is most likely to come from the Muslim Religious Council (*Majlis Agama Islam*), which supervises the administration of Islam and looks after the interest of the Muslim population in the state. The social and political cost of proselytizing Buddhism to the Malays may take the form of adverse reactions from the power structure within the Muslim polity itself, which may even undermine the very existence of Buddhism. So far the *Sangha* manages to avoid any communal and interreligious conflict by adhering strictly to the norms that Malays are not to be targeted as potential Buddhist converts.

Opening of Temple Doors to the Malays

Despite the stand that Malays are to be left alone as far as it concerns Buddhist missionary activities, the temple compound is not totally out of bounds to them. As a matter of fact, temple doors are open to them during most celebrations (*ngaan wat*). Hence, crowds of Malays can be seen mingling with Siamese and Chinese within the

monastic compound during these events. The main reason for Malays coming to the temple is that these events normally include entertainment of various kinds, such as shadow-puppet theatre (*nang talung*), musical revues (*dontrii*), and traditional dance-drama theatre (*manora* and *mak yong*). Other than Siamese and Chinese from distant and outlying towns and villages, Malays from immediate surrounding often constitute the bulk of the audience who contribute significantly towards the gate.

During non-festive occasions, too, Malays also make frequent visits to the temple mainly for some other reasons. Quite a number of monks are noted for their ability to dispense traditional medicine and herbal formulas for various ailments. Many monks are also known for their expertise in dealing with victims of black magic and sorcery. Malays who come to the temple during non-festive occasions are likely to be regular clients of these specialist monks.

A common practice among Kelantanese Malays is to consult Siamese monks for cases that proved ineffective when treated by Malay practitioners. In fact, traditional taxonomy of Malay diseases and ailments tends to attribute certain types of illness to Siamese and Brahmanistic origin, including the infamous effect from the use of oil extracted from the corpse of murder victims or person who died a violent death (Thai: *nam man tai hong*; Malay: *minyak mati dibunuh*). Hence, the prevailing belief is that the best treatment should be handled with the help of Siamese specialists. Cases suspected to be caused by black magic and sorcery of Siamese origin are quickly referred to these specialists instead of being sent to Malay healers (*bomoh*). Likewise, Malays do consult Siamese magician for “augmentative” magic, such as in the case of those looking for charm medicine. Some Siamese specialists are frequently approached for preventive and curative magic.¹² In this regard, one could say that Buddhist monks and lay specialists are not totally irrelevant to the social life of their Muslim neighbors.

The fact that Malays make use of services by Siamese specialists is nothing irregular in Kelantanese context. It has been a common practice given the fact that Malays and Siamese do share a common source with respect to pre-Islamic belief elements.¹³ Although strict Muslims frown upon this practice, the more liberal-minded Malays nevertheless reinterpret the behavior in terms of the Islamic concept of *ikhtiar* (literally means “efforts”), which covers attempts at finding solutions to problems by resorting to ways and means not necessarily within the realm of Islam.

At other levels of personal interaction, the Siamese and the Malays often seek each other’s help to mutually solve everyday problems. The following case illustrates how religious differences can be quite instrumental in solving specific problems related to porcine issues, an animal abhorred by the Malays but highly valued by the Siamese. It involves the supply of the animal by the Malays to the Siamese in a manner not necessarily amounting to an economic transaction; the dealings that take place qualify as a symbiotic kind of relationship that further strengthens interethnic ties.

In some places, the Malays are besieged with problems of wild boars attacking their rubber smallholdings. To overcome this problem, these animals have to be shot down. But this gives rise to another serious problem in disposing of the carcasses simply

because wild boars, like pigs and dogs, are taboo animals according to Islam. These animals are considered ritually polluting to the Muslims to the extent that any contact with them is forbidden (*baram*). So handling these dead animals creates many ritual problems and requires elaborate cleansing procedures. But the Siamese are glad to collect the carcasses, especially when extra meat is needed for major temple festivals. Hence, the Malays choose to hunt down wild boars one or two nights before the temple event begins. They would then send messages to their Siamese friends to come and take away the carcasses.

What transpires between both parties needs to be seen beyond the killing and the disposal of the dead animals. Both sides tend to derive mutual benefit from each other. On one hand, the Malays solve the problem of boars attacking their gardens by shooting them down, while the Siamese, on the other hand, see this as a convenient source of precious food. What ought to be highlighted also is that a certain amount of money does change hands between the two parties, but the Malays openly declare that they are not selling the wild boars to anyone. The Siamese too quickly admit that they are not buying any of those animals either. Whatever money they give to the Malays is meant to defray the cost of the bullets, nothing more than that. As can be seen too, there is no exchange of sale and purchase vows (*akad*) and the concern for conducting a transaction otherwise forbidden in Islam is conveniently circumnavigated.

Monetary and Material Support of the Chinese

As mentioned earlier, although the organization of Buddhism is under the sole control of the Siamese ethnic group, temple doors are open to other ethnic groups as well. Chinese patronage in particular is solicited by the Siamese clergy because their participation in temple rituals brings material and other social benefits. To this extent, Buddhist temples in Kelantan adopt an open policy which welcomes almost anybody, except Malays, to participate in the religious rituals.

At this juncture it is most important here to highlight the special relationship between the Siamese and the Chinese supporters of Buddhist temples in Kelantan. The majority of the latter group belongs to a social category commonly known as “rural” Chinese.¹⁴ These are Chinese immigrants of earlier periods who have originally settled themselves in rural areas, instead of urban areas. Known to the Malays as *Cina kampung* (literally, “village Chinese”), the rural Chinese consider themselves more *Malayanised* than the mainstream Chinese, in many ways similar to the Baba group of Malacca, Penang and Singapore.¹⁵ The rural Chinese are noted for their close association with the Malays, and their adaptability to and superb knowledge of Malay language and culture. Most of their “front stage” behavior is overtly and deliberately Malay to the extent of speaking Malay even among their own kind at home.¹⁶

Although the majority of the “rural” Chinese have adopted much of the local Malay culture, they have not become Muslims. Instead, they have their own system of worship as typified by beliefs in the guardian gods of the village and patron deities of the house.

Apart from the worship of their respective deities, the rural Chinese also patronize Siamese temples and take part in Buddhist rites and ceremonies. It is in this sense that Siamese Buddhism has also become the basis of identity for the rural Chinese *vis-à-vis* the larger, mainstream Chinese group. Most significantly, their participation in temple rituals makes them members of the same religious and social community as the Siamese.¹⁷

Their close association with the Siamese is perhaps attributable to the close kin relationships deriving from intermarriage between the two groups during the early period of Chinese migration, when the scarcity of Chinese females forced them to look for spouses from among the Siamese. Although intermarriages between Siamese and rural Chinese are not as common as they used to be, this kinship tie is widely acknowledged today even if neither group can trace them with genealogical precision.

The Chinese turn out to be the most generous and reliable supporters of the temple. Since Buddhist temples do not receive any direct grant from the government, donations from the Chinese laity and other Buddhist outsiders are indispensable. Indeed, the politics of temple survival is to attract as many Chinese as possible. As a general rule, a temple well endowed with material wealth is usually one which receives support not only from its village residents but also from outsiders, especially the Chinese. Hence, the larger the number of people who come to the temple, the more money the temple can expect to receive in terms of donation.

The majority of Chinese supporters of Siamese temples reside in various parts of Kelantan and other small townships. They constitute what I call “weekend pilgrims”; namely, people who make the rounds to temples during the weekends. Included in this category of worshippers are Siamese who originate from villages without temples, and those who have migrated to live in towns. Hence, temples which have a large number of visitors, especially those frequented by the Chinese and these weekend returnees, tend to be more prosperous compared to those that receive few visitors; more visitors means more resources can be collected in terms of cash donations and material gifts.

There is another pragmatic use of Chinese outsiders by temples. Whenever a temple needs to organize religious undertakings on a grand scale, various working committees are often set up. Included in these committees are prominent Chinese businessmen who have good contacts with politicians and the government. Their excellent rapport with Malay officers helps to facilitate dealings with the local authority. For instance, an application for a permit to hold various forms of entertainment during temple festivals tends to be speedily dealt with if it is arranged through Chinese businessmen who have contacts with officials at the district office. Hence, it is always good politics for the Siamese to include in the temple’s working committee distinguished Chinese businessmen or community leaders in order to make dealings with the bureaucracy less problematic.

What has been said above regarding the Chinese intermediaries is typical of the brokerage role played by the Chinese community in Kelantan for the Siamese. Politically active Chinese are known to mediate on behalf of the Siamese in order to secure

government aid for the temples.¹⁸ A number of Chinese politicians are known to offer various help to the Siamese in various matters in return for electoral pledges. This brokerage role is not limited to temple functions alone. Even arrangements to have electricity installed in the village are often facilitated by these intermediaries.

Special Relationship with Thailand and the Thai *Sangha*

Another important aspect of temple survival is that the state *Sangha* of Kelantan maintains a good working relationship with the *Sangha* of Thailand. Although Kelantan *Sangha* is an independent religious body, in practice it is closely linked to the Thai *Sangha* in many ways. Therefore, it is most appropriate to say that at times the Kelantan *Sangha* can be seen as an extension of the Thai *Sangha*. The special relationship with the Thai *Sangha* provides Buddhist temples in Kelantan with easy access to standard monastic guidelines and practices. In this respect, the Thai *Sangha* serves as the benchmark against which the Kelantanese *Sangha* measures its purity and conformity to accepted Buddhist practices. Hence, any monastic demeanor can be quickly monitored and checked. On the whole, Thailand, for all intents and purposes, provides the cultural and religious storehouse from which the Siamese of Kelantan, together with their monastic institution, draw the elements necessary for the reproduction of Theravada tradition in Kelantan. Thus, it is not unusual for the latest religious and cultural innovations that are fashionable in Thailand to quickly find their way to Siamese villages in remote Kelantan not only through the monks and the laity, who travel back and forth across the border, but also through Thai television broadcast.

In terms of scholarly pursuit, it is also in Thailand that one can find facilities for further religious training. Kelantanese monks who intend to make monkhood a lifelong career are likely to spend some time in temples in Thailand after being ordained to pursue higher studies in Buddhist learning, often sitting for various levels of ecclesiastical examinations. Upon passing these examinations and after gaining sufficient experience in monastic practices, including meditation, these monks eventually return to Kelantan to assume formal leadership in the local temples. Many abbots now serving in Kelantan are likely to have gone through this kind of exposure before being appointed to their present post.

The special relationship with Thailand also means that there are frequent exchanges of ritual visits between monks and laity on both sides of the border. These are best expressed during various temple ceremonies. Senior monks from Thailand, especially those from southern provinces, are often invited to officiate at major temple functions as honorable sponsors (*phuu upatham*) or to deliver special sermons during the occasion. Their presence not only graces the event but adds authenticity to the ceremony.

Sometimes pious laymen or *laymen extraordinaire* accompany distinguished Thai monks on their rounds to Kelantan.¹⁹ During their visits they demonstrate to the local laity the finer techniques of performing monastic rites, including proper procedure of expressing respect to monks, and the right method of reading and chanting Pali verses. All these are expected to be diligently emulated by the Siamese laity in Kelantan.

On other occasions, Kelantanese monks, together with the laity, often travel to Thailand to attend various temple functions held there. It is also quite common for monks of some standing and those who are very senior to be called over to Thailand to be awarded various religious titles by the Thai *Sangha*. On these occasions ceremonial fans (*phat job*) are given to them to symbolize their incorporation into the Thai ecclesiastical body.

During important temple ceremonies involving large groups of people, the influence of Thailand can be seen even more prominently. Typical of this is the way cremation ceremonies for senior monks are conducted. I have had the opportunity to witness one such occasion in June 1997, where the involvement of the Thai religious authorities was most prominent. The peak of the ceremony was officiated by the Thai consul based in the state capital, Kota Bharu. As representative of the Thai king his role was to symbolically deliver the funeral flame. Two officials from Thailand were specially dispatched to Kelantan to oversee and give instructions to the organizing committee with respect to the actual running of the event, in particular during the climax of the cremation ceremony itself. The event was also widely announced over radio and television networks in southern Thailand to ensure maximum participation of Siamese clergy and laity not only from Kelantan, but also from the southern provinces of Thailand. Busloads of participants also arrived from Kedah and Perlis, two other states in the northwest part of the peninsula with sizeable Siamese populations.

Although most Siamese villages are scattered all over rural areas of Kelantan, it is during temple ceremonies that monks and the laity from other villages are brought together. They are expected to attend in large numbers bringing along material and monetary contributions to help defray costs. Advance parties of men, women and monks are often sent from various villages to help in the preparation of the events.

Within the confinement of the temple's compound were also held performances of puppet shadow theater and other forms of entertainment. The event looked more like a fun fair than a funeral rite, with Thai songs and music being played over loudspeakers throughout the day. To add further authenticity to the event, a rare musical band that specializes in funeral music was also brought over from Thailand. An interesting point about the event was that public announcements were made mostly in standard Thai instead of the southern dialect, which is widely spoken among the Siamese of Kelantan.

It can be seen that temple undertakings of this nature also become the medium of expression for Siamese solidarity, because attendance at these ceremonies goes beyond the religious; it includes social and cultural reasons as well. Relatives, friends and members of the clergy from Thailand are no exception to the list of people invited to the ceremony. Temple events therefore become the excuse for social gathering of the Siamese of Kelantan as well as those from Thailand under a common religious banner.

What appears to be a local religious affair was actually a manifestation of Siamese ethnic solidarity within the enclosed compound of the temple. As the events unfolded

themselves, the Siamese have proven that by pooling together their resources, and by appealing to other non-Siamese co-religionists, especially the Chinese, they could consciously transform the ceremony into a focal point for the expression of their solidarity and sense of identity as a minority group. At the same time the collaboration of their ethnic and religious counterparts from Thailand proves that the Siamese of Kelantan are not alone; they are part of the bigger Thai diaspora outside Thailand. Thus, by using religious personality, symbols and regalia imported from Thailand, they have demonstrated that they are part of the global Thai community.

Concluding Remarks

The persistence of Buddhist temples in Kelantan seems to depend on the way the Siamese have adapted themselves to the local context to the extent of adopting Malay sacred symbols. Thus, by acknowledging the Sultan of Kelantan as the protector of Buddhism, the Siamese have assured for themselves and their religion a political legitimacy even if the bigger society is predominantly Muslim. At the same time, the Siamese clergy takes a non-confrontational stand by adopting the policy that no Buddhism should be proselytized among the Malays, a step which helps to diffuse potential interreligious conflicts. Although there have been occasional cross religious conversions in both directions, these are not interpreted as communal issues, thereby helping to diffuse interreligious tensions. Even though the Siamese maintain a well-defined ethnic boundary, they do not close their doors to Malays who seek the services of Buddhist monks and other Siamese specialists. By so doing and by being willing to share some of their cultural elements with the Malays, the Siamese manage to demonstrate that they pose no religious and cultural threat to the Malays.

In terms of economic strategy, the Siamese rely on the goodwill of Chinese supporters who provide them not only with monetary and material donations, but also with other social and economic benefits. Foremost in this is the indispensable brokerage role played by the Chinese on behalf of the Siamese. As a mark of their gratitude, the Siamese accommodate themselves to the religious need of the Chinese, including ordinations of Chinese candidates, even though these are merely for token purposes. As mentioned above, some temples even go to great lengths to please Chinese worshippers in order to secure their patronage.

The very survival of Siamese Buddhist temples also depends on the good relationship they constantly maintain with the *Sangha* of Thailand. The support extended by the Thai *Sangha* means that Kelantanese temples operate as if they are part of the bigger network of Buddhism in matters related to ritual conducts and social management of the religion. From the perspective of Kelantan *Sangha*, the Thai *Sangha* and Thailand in general remain uppermost in its effort of maintaining a continuous existence in a social and cultural environment which is predominantly Islamic. It appears that the *Sangha* body of Kelantan, for the sake of its very survival, has to maintain a dualistic existence. This is symbolized by two things: while the ceremonial fans given by the Thai *Sangha*

formalize the close relationship between Kelantanese monks and those of Thailand, the letters of appointment from the Sultan of Kelantan formalize the acknowledgement and patronage of a Muslim ruler.

It can therefore be argued that cultural coexistence between Siamese Buddhists and Malay Muslims in Kelantan seems to work well despite a socio-political setting noted for its orthodoxy and fundamentalist traits. As a minority group, the Siamese have adopted various strategies to ensure the survival and persistence of Theravada Buddhism, including the use of Malay kingship as the symbol of Buddhist religious protector, the confinement of Buddhist religious evangelism to non-Malays and the appeal to the Chinese for financial and material support.

Endnotes

1. Throughout the paper I have used the term “Siamese” to refer specifically to those who live in Kelantan and other parts of peninsular Malaysia, in preference to the term “Thai”. As I have discussed elsewhere, the term “Thai” seems to be of recent origin in Kelantan although there is a big debate among the Thais themselves regarding the appropriateness of using the term “Siamese” in contemporary context. However, for the sake of comparison and clarity of arguments, the term “Siamese” is used to differentiate them from the “Thais,” meaning the people of Thailand. (See Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, “Buddhism and Ethnicity: the Case of the Siamese of Kelantan.” *Sojourn* 2 (1987): 231–254; and *Buddhism and Ethnicity: Social Organization of a Buddhist Temple in Kelantan* (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

2. There are 13,000 Malaysian Siamese in Kelantan http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian_Siamese accessed 23 September 2009. Based on a survey done in the year 2000, Kelantan has a population of 1,313,014 people. The Malays represent the largest number, totaling 95%, followed by the Chinese 3.8%, Indians 0.3% and others 0.9%. Based on the same survey, 95% of them are Muslims, while 4.4% are Buddhists. Christians 0.2%, Hindus 0.2% and other faiths 0.2%. Information drawn from <http://www.statistics.gov.my/eng/> accessed 27 September 2009.

3. The role of Siam in the affairs of the Malay states has been covered by various scholars. See C. Skinner, *The civil war in Kelantan in 1839*. Monograph No. 2 (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1965); David K. Wyatt. “Nineteenth Century Kelantan: A Thai View.” in William R. Roff (ed.) *Kelantan: Religion, Society and Politics in a Malay State* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1974). On the role of Siam in the affairs of Kedah and Perlis, see R. Bonney, *Kedah 1771–1821: the Search for Security and Independence* (Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1971); Sharom Ahmat. “Kedah-Siam Relations, 1821–1905.” *Journal of the Siam Society* 59 (1971): 97–117; David J. Banks, 1980. “Politics and Ethnicity on the Thai-Malay Frontier: the Historical Role of the Thai-Speaking Muslims of Kedah,” *Kabar Seberang* 7 (1980): 98–113; and Walter F. Vella. *Siam under Rama III 1824–1851*, Monograph for the Association for Asian Studies (New York, J. J. Augustin, 1957).

4. More details of this have been discussed in Roger Kershaw, “Native but not Bumiputra: Crisis and Complexity in the Political Status of the Kelantan Thais after Independence,” *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography* 3 (1984): 46–71. Mokhzani discusses similar case for Siamese who live in Malaysian states of Kedah and Perlis, where they are also allowed to own lands in Malay reserve areas. (See B. A. R. Mokhzani, *Credit in a Malay Peasant Economy*. PhD. Thesis, University of London, 1973). In other places, Siamese are considered as similar to Malays when it comes to political party membership. For instance in April 1994, a group of Siamese in the state of Perlis applied to be officially admitted as party members of United Malays National Organization — UMNO (*New Straits Times*, April 14, 1994: 10). The party, a dominant partner in the Malaysian ruling coalition government, was originally set up exclusively for Malays only, but the recent opening of its doors to the Siamese proves

their acceptance as almost equal in status to indigenous Malays. On UMNO and its origin see, for instance, John N. Funston. *Malay Politics in Malaysia: a Study of the United Malays Nationalist Organisation and Party Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1980).

5. See Roger Kershaw, 1984, *op. cit.*

6. *Ibid.*, 55.

7. Most Siamese settlements have a temple each, while other villages, which are too small to justify for the establishment of a full-fledged temple may have a *sammaksong*— a small building which provides shelter to visiting monks who make the rounds to preach and conduct Buddhist rites. Apart from a number of *sammaksong* there are twenty temples in the state with an average population of about five monks.

8. Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, "Buddhism and Ethnicity: the Case of the Siamese of Kelantan." *Sojourn* 2 (1987): 231–254; *Buddhism and Ethnicity: Social Organization of a Buddhist Temple in Kelantan* (Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); and *Wat sayam nai Kelantan — Siamese Temples in Kelantan* (in Thai) *Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 2(1)(1995): 5–19.

9. While some temple events are held on exact lunar dates, such as *Makha Bucha* and *Visakha Bucha*, other religious events may be scheduled for more suitable dates to take advantage of the weekend and gazetted public holidays. Since weekend holidays in Kelantan fall on Fridays, which are Muslim holidays, major temple events are planned to fall on these days instead of Sundays, in contrast to normal practices in Thailand. For instance, gift-giving (*kathin*) to mark the end of the lent period (*khao phansa*), ordinations, and dedicatory celebrations are always planned for Fridays so that more people can come and participate. So is the case with other activities not bound by exact lunar reckoning. They are organized to coincide either with public holidays or with any of the Fridays.

10. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

11. However, royal patronage in itself is not a new phenomenon if we consider the fact that Kelantan used to be a vassal state of Thailand with the local Muslim rulers often being given specific instructions to look after the interest of local Buddhist population under the directive of Thai kings.

12. There are quite a number of lay magicians in Siamese villages who specialize in the making of love potions. In 1982 I was present when a Malay woman consulted an *acaan wat* expressing her concern for her husband's second marriage. Fearing an impending divorce, she asked for some magical charms to entice her husband back. Apart from that it is not uncommon for Malays to ask Siamese specialists for magical formulæ for various purposes. They are even asked to forecast the location of lost items of jewelry or stolen cows and other domestic animals. Malays and Chinese who gamble in the four-digit lotteries are known to consult Siamese specialists for winning numbers. Golomb mentions the case of minor wife of a king traveling all the way from the west coast to fetch some "love medicine" from a Siamese specialist (*mo sanae*) in an effort to win back the affection of her estranged husband. (see Louis Golomb, *Brokers of Morality: Thai Ethnic Adaptation in a Rural Malaysian Setting*, (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1978, 71).

13. Cusinier (1936: 2) makes a point about this when she writes, "*Kelantan, par sa situation géographique, devait être amené à des relations fréquentes avec le Siam; les colonies siamoises qui se sont maintenues autour de la capitale, Kota Bharu, en témoignent. Ces relations ont marqué leur influence dans certains vocables employé vis-à-vis des esprits et des divinités et dans la composition de certain offrandes; mais les analogies profondes tiennent plus à une origine commune qu'à des influences réciproques.*" Jeanne Cusinier, *Danses magiques de Kelantan* (Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie, 1936).

14. Although statistically, both "town" and "rural" Chinese are classified as a single ethnic group, culturally there are fundamental differences between the two. The majority of "urban" Chinese in Kelantan belong to the recent group of Chinese migrants that typifies the mainstream Chinese of the west coast states. While most urban-dwelling Chinese are descendants of late nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrants, most of the rural-based Chinese are descendants of those who arrived much earlier, perhaps as early as the fifteenth century.

15. For more detailed discussion on earlier Chinese settlements in Kelantan, see S. M. Middlebrook, "Pulai: an Early Chinese Settlement in Kelantan," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 11 (1933):151–156; Sharon A. Carstens, Pulai: Memories of a Gold Mining Settlement in Ulu Kelantan," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 53(1980): 50–67; and, J. W. Cushman and A. C. Milner, "Eighteenth and Nineteenth-century Chinese Accounts of the Malay Peninsula," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52(1979): 1–56. On the Baba Chinese, see for instance, Tan Chee Beng, "Baba Chinese, non-Baba Chinese and Malays: a Note on Ethnic Interaction in Malacca," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 7 (1979): 20–29. For accounts of "rural" Chinese or the earlier group of Chinese immigrants, see also Robert L. Winzeler, "Ethnic Complexity and Ethnic Relationship in an East Coast Malay Town," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 2 (1974): 45–61; and "The Rural Chinese of the Kelantan Plain," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 54 (1981):1–23; Roger Kershaw, "The Chinese in Kelantan, West Malaysia, as Mediators of Political Integration to the Kelantan Thais," *Review of Southeast Asian Studies*, 3 (3 & 4): (1973): 1–10. and Tan Chee Beng, "Peranakan Chinese in Northeast Kelantan with Special Reference to Chinese Religion," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 55 (1982): 26–52. That the earlier Chinese migrants met little opposition from the Malay peasantry could have been due to the fact that the former must have arrived at the time when good agricultural lands were still abundant. Moreover, residence patterns seem to indicate that the Chinese did not compete with Malays for land, because the former chose to occupy less fertile land, usually quite close to rivers, while the latter preferred, for their padi cultivation, land away from the river banks (Winzeler, 1981, *op. cit.*: 7).

16. Douglas Raybeck, "Ethnicity and Accommodation: Malay-Chinese Relations in Kelantan, Malaysia," *Ethnic Groups* 2 (1980): 241–268.

17. Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, "Two Faces of Buddhism: Chinese Participation in the Siamese Temples in Kelantan," in Cheu Hock Tong (ed.). *Chinese Beliefs and Practices in Southeast Asia: Studies on the Chinese Religion in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1993).

18. Kershaw 1973, *op. cit.*, 3.

19. Donald K. Swearer, "The Role of Layman *extraordinaire* in Northern Thai Buddhism," *Journal of the Siam Society* 64 (1976): 149–168.

A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Islam in Yunnan Province

Dai and Paxidai

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I, a Nichiren Buddhist, and Dr. Tehranian, a Sufi Muslim, have chosen the road of dialogue. We have chosen to use dialogue to recognize, learn from, and value our differences in beliefs and backgrounds, and we have chosen to see whatever differences may exist not as walls but as varying planes and angles on the scintillating diamond of global culture.¹

Introduction

This article describes the Dai people,² and the *Paxidai*, 帕西傣. They live in Southwest China, Yunnan.

China, Yunnan. Among the nationality-minorities (*minzu*), the Muslim Paxidai are classified as Hui but they speak Dai as well as Putonghua. This article discusses also Sinicization and the prospect of religious harmony based on extensive fieldwork in the region.

For the founder of the department of anthropology of Xiamen University, Chen Guoqiang, cultural anthropology is integrated, comprehensive and theoretical.³ But for Lin Huixiang, in the same department, anthropology focuses on primitive conditions of human society; sociology discusses contemporary society. The current study is socio-anthropological. It starts at the village, in line with the slogan of Fei Xiatong, the leading Chinese anthropologist of the 20th century: "We are first rural" (*women nongcun zhong*).⁴

Works about Yunnan ethnology and minority nationalities in Chinese or English are for example *Yunnan Shaoshu Minzu (The Minorities of Yunnan)* (1980) and the Tai studies of Raendchen and Zheng.⁵ The discourse of race is situated at the periphery of the Chinese symbolic universe and does not concern the two groups of Dai (pron. Tai) studied in this article who are of the same anthropic origin, speak the same mother tongue (Dai Lue), but follow two different religions.

This article defines the Buddhist Dai and Muslim Paxidai, and seeks to show the importance of harmony and trade in a case study about the Menghai area of Yunnan. It

emphasizes the harmony between different religious cultures.⁶ It also looks at religious practice and beliefs, and describes religious believers from the vantage point of anthropology to provide a secular worldview.⁷

For Biletski, religion is after all a way of living. “The current state of religious freedom in China (PRC) can be compared to the proverbial half glass of water; while some people see the glass as half full, others view it as half empty.”⁸ Most would likely agree that given the almost complete absence of religious freedom twenty years ago in China, to have the glass half full today demonstrates remarkable progress. Perhaps more importantly, the water continues to rise. Throughout its long history, China has had an interesting and sometimes tumultuous relationship with organized religions, both domestic and foreign. Because this conflict has appeared throughout Chinese history and across many different governments, it may appear to some to be an inherent feature of Chinese culture. Indeed, unlike most Western societies, China was primarily and officially dominated for more than two thousand years by the semi-religious influence of Confucian philosophy. Since immemorial time, ancestor worship is the basic Chinese religion. How one views religions in China largely depends on the position and political orientation of the viewer.

Buddhism has a two thousand year history in China, and Islam entered in the Chinese world for the first time in 751 at the battle of Talas. Contacts with Arabs, however, could have been earlier in eastern Uzbekistan, in Ferghana (Ta Yuan).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976, roughly) most religious activities were banned in China. Only one mosque was officially open during that period, but China is sheer and despite the severe conditions imposed to all religions it is possible that in remote places Muslims could have sometimes attended underground ritual *Salat* prayers.

The Chinese government first announced the new Religious Affairs Provisions on 30 November 2004, and they were published in early 2005 by the New China News Agency. On 1 March 2005, the State Council’s Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) entered into force.

China currently has approximately sixteen thousand Buddhist temples and about 320,000 Buddhist monks and nuns, and more than 40,000 mosques. China has ten Muslim national minorities with a total official population of twenty million adherents to Islam. In fact, the number is probably closer to fifty million. There are more than one hundred and ten million Buddhists in China.

The citizens of China are currently free to express their religious beliefs and may officially choose a religious affiliation within the five major religions. The Document 19 of March 1982 and the Constitution of China recognize only Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam and Protestantism. However, not all Buddhist cults are allowed in China.

An abstract of the full text of the Chinese legislative resolution banning cults, 30 October 1999, follows:

1. Heretic cult organizations shall be resolutely banned according to law.
2. The principle of combining education with punishment should be followed in order to instruct the majority.

3. Long-term, comprehensive instruction on the Constitution should be carried out among citizens.
4. All corners of society shall be mobilized in preventing and fighting against cult activities.

This is an important text aiming to ensure social stability. Buddhist Dai Lue minority in Xishuang Banna (in Dai *Sipsong Panna*) and the neighboring Muslim community called *Paxidai* speaks Dai Lue, Putonghua (Mandarin), and Yunnanese. The Dai of Xishuang Banna belong to the larger group called Tai speakers, as do the Lao. We will try to prove that popular religion exists in China and confirm the thesis of Mayfair Yang that religious revival is in progress.⁹ But “modernity” in Xishuang Banna cannot be compared to that of Wenzhou District in Zhejiang Province, which has links all over the world and in particular with Europe. Culture is unbounded, non-unitary, reified, changing, and also depends on history.¹⁰

History

Sima Qian's *Shiji* (around 100 BC) mentions the ethnological but not geographical meaning of Dian. So, “Dian” could mean “Tai”. Zheng Xiaoyun puts the origin of the Tai or their place of birth in Yunnan around the Dianchi Lake and Chuxiong, but forgets to mention the kingdom of Nanzhao, a key toponym concerning the root of the Tai people.¹¹ Elsewhere, Shen is right when he says that *Zhao* or “Chao” is not an ethnic identity criterion but became a place name or a “geographical name” meaning “country”.¹² It seems also difficult to deny that Tai and Cantonese are related languages sharing a common linguistic root. Frontier peoples always find a common language to communicate with the others.

Yunnan has many Tai speaking people, mainly the Dai and the Zhuang. This study is centered on the Dai speaking minority, in which Buddhists are largely dominant.¹³ Yunnan, and in particular Menghai District, close to the Burmese border, were “safe havens” on the South Silk Road, the caravan track where Muslims always played a central role. Yunnan, at the end of all the dynasties as well as in the 1950s and during the Cultural Revolution before Deng's reforms, has played this role of haven. After the death of the Muslim leader Du Wenxiu (d. 1873) who became independent of the Qing dynasty during many years, Yunnan during many decades was not safe for the Muslims — except for the collaborators of the Qing Government. The enraged Qing Dynasty ordered the massacre of hundreds of Muslim villagers near the city of Simao after the fall of the Du's Sultanate in Dali. There is a stele in Chinese in the sacred tomb (*Gongbei*) of Simao (now called Puer) recording this massacre.

But some rare Muslims who were not pro-Qing survived in Menghai, where the ancestors of Muslim Dai are said to be partly from Dali. Unfortunately no historical legend is kept in the two Muslim villages studied here. Male Muslims from the outside came from around Dali or other part of Yunnan during the past century, and married Dai women who were converted to Islam. Some came more recently during or after the Cultural Revolution. Their arrival is the basis for one of the hypotheses for the foundation

of two Paxidai villages in Menghai. Among these incomers, a Hui from Gansu married at the end of the 1990s a Paxidai woman. The parent of this Hui from Gansu came later by train from very far away. These paternal grandparents now stay in their son's house to take care of their two male grandchildren born from this Hui/Paxidai union. The children's parents both work in the city of Menghai six kilometers away and only come back to the village in the late afternoon. Other Muslims, originally Yunnanese, came back recently from Burma to live again in their country of origin in a Paxidai village.

Dai and Muslim Identity in Yunnan

There are very few comparative studies of close Buddhist and Muslim communities such as in India,¹⁴ and there is even less research in China on this topic.

There are 55 non-Han minority nationalities in China. Among them, ten of these nationalities are Muslims; this study only looks at the Paxidai who are officially designated and called "Hui".

The current study concerns two Yunnanese villages located near the city of Menghai. These Muslims are not exactly Hui but rather Dai. Their classification as a minority is not well defined. However, the socio-political designation of *minzu* allows in principle the Hui to negotiate their classification, which sometimes does not fit the integration to Chinese rule.¹⁵ A question of classification remains for the Paxidai, are they part of the Dai *minzu* (minority nationality) or simply Hui? Technically the Paxidai could claim to be Tai, but this does not appear on their identity card which only mentions "Hui" (Hui means "Muslim"). The name of a person's religion does not appear on official Chinese documents.

We have already mentioned the legal point of view, but there are other aspects. Unity (*tuanjie*) is fundamental for all countries. We have to ask also what is the influence of this type of polity and identity on the two religions studied here?¹⁶

Buddhism

The principal teachings of Gautama Buddha can be summarized in what the Buddhists call the "Noble Truths": There is suffering and misery in life; the cause of this suffering and misery is desire; suffering and misery can be removed by removing desire; desire can be removed by following the Eight-Fold Path. There is an absence of the central concept of God creator in Buddhism.

Buddhism is not the original religion of the Tai people but it "fits so well in the Tai traditional way of life and also in their old indigenous religion that one could think, if it is not the Tai who have invented Buddhism, it was at least determined for them to follow".¹⁷ Generally speaking, the majority of the Dai in Yunnan, and the other Tai people of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand have a common religion, Theravada Buddhism. The Dai Lue of Xishuang Banna studied here also follow Theravada Buddhism.

Spirits and Dai Buddhism

Despite religious differences between Dai and Paxidai, there are similarities and accommodation is always present in China. Even if the Dai Lue of Xishuang Banna

enjoyed considerable autonomy during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), they did not ignore Chinese religion such as the “Grand Sacrifice” (*dasi*) including sacrifices to Heaven (*Tian*), Earth (*Di*), to ancestors, and other sacrifices to the Sun, the Moon and the God of Agriculture. The Dai Lue worship the *phi muang*, the spirit of the home, the village and the state in a hierarchical structure.¹⁸ This cult is also linked to an ancient agricultural ritual, but territoriality is the central concept. In Menghai, a small bull is sacrificed each year to the *phi muang*. The meat of the bull is divided among all the villagers to perpetuate social cohesion and the spirit of cooperation in the same generation (*pinawngkan*). At the lowest level, the objects of worship among others are the Dragon God. Chinese worship of the Dragon is very similar to the snake cult of the Dai *Naga*.¹⁹ For the Tai villager, Buddhist and non-Buddhist rites (such as the worship of trees, in particular the banyan tree) are part of a single system.²⁰

Both Buddhist Dai and Paxidai of Menghai had former links in particular before 1949 with Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand. The Dai Lue Buddhist population of Menghai district like to go on pilgrimage to Kengtung (formerly Xieng Tong, Jingdong in Chinese). Between 1950 and 1985, however, none of the Dai had the official opportunity to cross the border into Burma. Once in the 1990s, a group of Dai Lue villagers went to Myanmar and they remember the splendor of the Tai Khuen *Wat*.

In Yunnan, despite numerous minorities, the socio-economic domination of the Han Chinese is evident. In Xishuang Banna, in contrast to the pre-1949 period, the current relationship between Yunnan and Burma is less business-oriented than Dehong. However, in the Paxidai village Manzhaihui a cattle market that buys oxen in Myanmar and sells them in Thailand with good profits, is taking advantage of the Yunnanese modern highways.

There is a primary focus on individual and group identity, religious and linguistic. Language is part of culture. The importance of Tai languages (Tai-Kadai family: Dai, Lao, Shan and Thai) along those borders is crucial. These languages are convincing and reliable tools of communication which could create an immediate and true kinship relationship between locutors. Han often use Dai friends more fluent in languages when their border trade is potentially risky. This cultural importance of Tai languages contributes positively to a better relationship among peoples along these borders, even if Chinese and Burmese languages also play an evident powerful politico-linguistic role.

Rituals, myths and Buddhist education

The binomial concept myth and ritual, which can be separated as well as connected, was analyzed at length by Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss. One myth tells about a Tai ruler Phadeang and her courted lover Nang Ai.²¹ The myth includes a fireworks competition to conquer the lover’s heart which is similar to the current rocket festival called *Bunbongfai* still practiced in Xishuang Banna and Dehong districts. Links exist between Buddhism and village guardian spirits. However, the monks try not to mix Buddhist ritual and spirit cults; but it is difficult to deny a link. The key Buddhist ceremony is the joyous

procession of the Dai in the village's alleys, and the monks follow. The rockets circumambulate with the ecstatic cortege, they are later stored a while in the *wat* and at night the *bongfai* will be fired to ask for auspicious rain to the guardian spirits. A banquet is often served to all the villagers.

The Dai Buddhist education exists in the nearby Dai village that I studied since 1986. I returned to this village in March 2009 to update my knowledge. The public teaching of Dai, Putonghua and simplified Chinese characters is compulsory in primary and early secondary education and it ignores the "tai" cultural system which includes Dai rites of passages and a basic knowledge of Hinayana Buddhism. The main Dai festival for the Tai New Year (*phi mai*), the Water Festival with boat races on the Mekong, attracts each year many Han Chinese and tourists. The Dai villagers go, in a sort of pilgrimage, to the main city Jinghong each year for this central festival. Harsh economic conditions could compel them to stay in their village. In addition, Dai or Bulang Buddhist monks come to officiate in the small Buddhist pagoda (*wat*) constructed in the village in the late 1980s (Bulang are another minority of Yunnan). The relationship of the *wat* to the village is fundamental. All the villagers participate when there is a ceremony. So the reconstruction of the village's *wat* is a crucial event. During the earthquake on 30 November 1989; nobody in the village was harmed; the author was present in the village at that time. The village's headman, who established this pagoda, passed away in 2008. His nephew who studied in Jinghong Dai Buddhism and the two alphabets (Buddhist Lue and the new Dai script) is currently the monk in charge of this *wat*.

Islam

The existence of Dai-speaking Paxisai in Menghai (in the two villages called Manzhaihui and Manluanhui) is linked to the ancient caravans that plied between Yunnan and Burma. The link between Menghai and Kengtung, Burma, was closed between 1950 and 1988. The networks of Islamic merchants were frequently developed in cities through a framework of Yunnanese mosques in Kunming, Mojiang, Simao and Jinghong. In Mojiang, a Sufi's sandalwood plantation supplied valuable trading load of wood for cremation. These Muslims traveled with their mules in daily stages of around thirty kilometers and carried loads of 70–100 kilograms.²² Temporary Muslim migration occurred back and forth from Yunnan to Burma and Thailand for many centuries.

Kengtung in Myanmar has two mosques but no Muslims from Menghai have gone there in recent times. Jinghong organized an exchange with the Islamic Association in Kengtung but it seems that Menghai Muslims were not invited. In Yunnan, the business-oriented Burmese Muslim community prefers contacts with bigger centres in Yunnan such as Jinghong and even more Ruili in the Dehong District.²³ It is crucial to look at the link Mojiang-Simao-Menghai; caravans disappeared, but links among Muslims are maintained along this road by mosques and ancient markets. Harmony of relations between dominant Buddhists and the Muslims are consequently aiming toward peaceful border relations between China and Myanmar and between China and Thailand. Hui have from the beginning been known for their commercial skills.

Hui or Paxidai Muslims and other minorities in China have to adapt their principles to the Chinese law. Marriage traditions and rules explain how the law works. According to the Qur'an (4-3), a Muslim may marry one, two, three or four wives. But in China it is possible to marry only one wife at a time. Divorce is possible with Chinese and Shari'ah laws. Since humility (*tawadu* Arabic) is a basic Muslim virtue. Humility takes seriously the fact that we live in a world and under a state i.e. China for the Paxidai.

Concerning the identity of these Dai Muslims, they are simply classified *Hui* or *Huimin*. For this study in Yunnan, among the ten Muslims minorities in the country, Hui is the only ethnonym which is used to designate their official Muslim identity. Their double identity as Hui and Dai is totally ignored. Unlike the Buyi, Dai, Dong and Zhuang people who are recognized Tai-speaking minorities, the Paxidai are simply designated Hui. This differentiates them from Buddhism, the main religious identity of many Dai (Lue of Menghai, and Neua in Jinggu and Dehong). On the other hand, most of the Hui in Yunnan have also a strong Islamic identity through their Arabic names Sha, Sa from Shah, Na . . . but this fact does lead to a special classification either. They are simply classified as Hui.

Muslim Beliefs

Muslims believe in Hell. "Fear the fire whose fire is men and stones" (*Qur'an* 2-24). The garden is the most frequent Koranic symbol of paradise. So paradise is called al-Jannah (garden in Arabic). The Muslim rites of passage are not in fact so linked with a *leitmotiv* such as the central question of merit in Buddhism — linked to the concept of karma — which is always present in the minds and in the ritualistic daily life of Buddhists. The Muslim approach is maybe more indirect. However, monks and Imams are key officiants for village's rites. The insistent issue of merit (*bun*) is maybe relatively comparable to the mandatory character of Muslim prayers. The prayer at the mosque is more meritorious than private prayers. In China the obligation that there always be an Imam on duty in city mosques during day in order to remain in contact with the Islamic Association is less strict in rural areas. Since agriculture is very demanding during planting and harvest, Yunnanese Muslim villagers do not perhaps always attend the five prayers as compared to the more faithful attendance in city mosques.

Rituals

Manzhaihui is a Muslim village we studied, which has 79 households. There, on 28 February 2009, a Fatihah ceremony was held, in a house behind a grocery shop, for the soul of a departed elder who died one year before. In all Southeast Asia, as in other parts of the Muslim world, it is common to recite the first Surah of the Qur'an and the Surah is also repeated over sick persons. Women, men and children of twenty households were present at this ceremony. The young Imam and the former Imam, now a business man, officiated.

The ritual lasted around one hour. The elders, the headman and the former headman, were seated in armchairs. All the participants except the two imams were seated on carpets on the ground as is common in China when numerous persons are attending a funeral or a memorial service.

After the ceremony, all the participants were invited to a banquet: a ragout of stewed beef, sliced dry beef, white rice, pumpkin soup and other vegetables, and tangerines and bananas.

Shown as in this example, the Paxidai follow the same life cycles and Islamic festivals as the other Hui. However, very few of them are rich enough to go on pilgrimage to Mecca to become *Haji* or *Hajjab*.

Minority and Sinicization

It is useful to understand better the relationship between the Han Chinese and the minority peoples of China. Yunnan is a province of many minorities, 24 in total. This number of nationality minorities is one of the highest of any Chinese province.

Society and harmony in Menghai

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), harmony was rarely present anywhere in China and in Xishuang Banna. Tensions exist in all society one time or another. Continuities and transformations in the society are essential to progress such as in the 1980s with the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. This transformation of Chinese society, including the minorities studied here, paved the way for China to be the second power in the world after the United States, despite the current economic crisis. Economy and society are interdependent, so it is impossible in 2009 to forget the social and economic influences on the Buddhists and Muslims of Menghai. Their modernization, which has consequences for their religion, depends on sinicization. *Tuanjie*, the unity of the minorities, is a consequence of the necessary sinicization.

What are the consequences of modernization on religion? Modernization is implacable. Buddhist Dai as well as Muslims use mobile phones and like Chinese television, even if religions are not discussed on TV. A certain assimilation and harmony are necessary to harmonize this huge country. For China, modernity means rationalization, growing urbanization, secularization of religions, mass social movement, refined technologies, and discourse about the new epoch.²⁴

For Tibi the Muslim education system imbues its offspring with a feeling of superiority and does not alleviate the crisis-ridden situation.²⁵ In fact, the present case study shows that the Muslim community of Menghai is immersed in the Chinese educational system, which produces itself a feeling of superiority more than a feeling of inferiority. It is difficult to make comments.

The Imam in the mosque is the main officiant for life-crisis rituals: birth, circumcision, marriage and death. In return, households give the Imam gifts in kind or cash. There are collective rituals for the Eid festivals where the entire village participates, with prayers and banquets at the mosque.

The Buddhist Dai and the Muslims of China are communities controlled by ritual. For Fei Xiaotong, the elders are also key persons in the society. The kinship system and kinship connections are certainly important. Education and prosperity are important in the Buddhist and Muslim communities as well. Certainly the *Qur'an*, the basic book of all Muslim, and its last Surah which concerns *jinn* ("spirit" in Arabic) cannot be forgotten by any Muslim, even in Menghai.

One of the most important Dai spirits is the Naga, the water serpent, which is present everywhere in Xishuang Banna. On each side of Dai pagodas climbs a long Naga, symbol of sexuality. When a human being enters the status of ascetic monk, he renounces virility and leaves behind family life.²⁶ The forest of Xishuang Banna is one of the most luxuriant of all China. In this surrounding nature the Buddhist Dai of Menghai do consider seriously the spirits *phi* of the tropical forest and their power. Even the most orthodox Dai monk has this ambivalent type of faith.

The Buddhist Dai Lue also have their own rituals which can be totally different from the rituals of their blood- and language-related Paxidai cousins in Menghai, but ritual remains fundamental. The importance of ethical relationship is also central in China. One of the ten relationships in the *Book of Rites (Liji)* is ghost-spirit. The spirits of ancestors were believed to live on and had power to bless or curse their descendants, depending on whether they were appropriately worshiped. The belief in the active engagement of ancestors in worldly events connected the living and dead in a single stream.²⁷ The decline of belief is not evident because Chinese continue to link business and ancestor worship.

For the Muslims, including those of Menghai, the *jinn* are omnipresent as the *phi* of the Dai. *Jinn* are the inhabitants of the subtle world, made of "smokeless fire". Satan is also considered a *jinn*. There is no direct comparison between *jinn* and *phi*, but the *phi* are always present in the Tai anthropological literature.

Purity and Beliefs

Purity is a very important concept for the Muslims as well as the Buddhists. Ducor's translation has demonstrated Buddhism has a crucial concept of the nature of things (or of the Law, Skr. *dharmā*) which makes the living enter into an ultimate purity.²⁸ Similarly, Islam in China is known as "the Pure and True Teaching" (*Qing zhen jiao*).²⁹ In general and for food in particular, *balal* (Arabic for "purity") is equally a central concept in Islam. *Uzu*, ceremonial and ritualistic washing, is compulsory before the prayer. The right hand is purer in both religions than the left one. So, the right hand is the purest for eating. Death rites are central in both religions, Buddhism and Islam.

The Buddhist Dai and the Muslim Paxidai are modernizing themselves and are exposed to globalization. So Sinicization or Han-Chinese influence is essential to understand modernization in China and the harmonious development of the society and the economy, and the preservation of an essential multi-culture. Chinese scholars sometimes ignore the role of sinicization and instead insist on state's political integration

and local social conditions. They may simply deny the social and cultural role of that assertive acculturation and integration.³⁰

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to compare contemporary Buddhism and Islam in Yunnan. The thesis of Israeli concerning Sunni Islam in China mentioned that, structurally, Islam is an institutional religion which constituted an effective block against any interaction with the Chinese religion.³¹ However, in fact, the Muslims are among the most assimilated people in China, and their modernization is linked to the majority's sinicization.³² This concept and the consequent orientation toward unity are positive because they unite all the peoples of China. This could be discussed. For these Paxidai, as for the other Muslims of China, it seems that Gladney is right to stress that they are being secularized and continue to negotiate "their accommodation to Chinese rule".³³ However we cannot generalize and group together all the Muslims of Yunnan (Hui and a small Uyghur community which confirms my "safe heaven" thesis about Yunnan being a peaceful province) concerning the process of secularization.

The acceptance of other groups is easier in particular when two different groups speak the same language as in the case study of Menghai. This paper tries to demonstrate a situation contrary to that of Israeli's thesis — a certain harmony between Paxidai and Buddhist Dai. This harmony is also confirmed in Ruili, Dehong, where Muslims and Buddhist Dai Neua live currently in harmony despite past events such as Du Wenxiu's uprising in the 19th century. This is a case of interesting facts linked to historical religion which are useful in understanding contemporary religion.³⁴ Chinese rulers prefer harmony between the different nationalities of the country, and emperors such as Qian Long (1736–1796) reprimanded Chinese officials who confiscated Muslim books in Chinese and Arabic.³⁵

Between 1980 and 1989, a certain promotion of religion largely contributed to the re-building of the identities of ethnic minorities. This is especially true for the Buddhist Dai and Muslim Paxidai. Harmony fits these minorities and their emerging cultures, but does not avoid a tight control of religions affairs in Yunnan. The Buddhist Dai have a constant preference for symbols like the Naga in art, mythology, and in village ritual. The Muslim Paxidai of Menghai keep the Naga symbol in their architecture on the roofs of their modern houses.

The relation between the rocket festival addressed to the guardian spirit and the harvest festival may well be the model of a general process, mutual accommodation between Buddhism and the spirit cults. However, more relevant is the Paxidai's cultural accommodation of Islam and Buddhism, Han culture and Dai language, *jinn* and *pbi*, and the everyday sinicization and *tuanjie*. The two unique Paxidai villages in Yunnan try to live in harmony with their nearest neighbours, Buddhist Dai and Han. Without such a basic principle of adaptation, religion in general would not have the importance it does

have in people's lives, in China and everywhere. In conclusion, despite a chaotic past history such as the Cultural Revolution, it seems at present that Buddhism and Islam have a promising future in China.

Endnotes

1. Tehrani Majid, *Global Civilization: A Buddhist-Islamic Dialogue* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company Limited, 2003), 180. <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/hkulibrary/Doc?id=10133011&ppg=198>>
2. The **Dai** in China (Yunnan) are part of the larger **Tai** linguistic classification, which includes any group that speaks a Tai language. The distribution of the Tai is widespread in Southeast Asia and includes the Dai, Lao, Shan, and Thai. The term "Thai" refers to the citizens of Thailand. In China, Dai Lue, the reference in this study, and another group called Dai Neua or Nua (mainly in Jinggu and Dehong districts), are Buddhists. Buddhist Dai means Dai Lue in this paper. Other Dai of China are Dai Dam (Black), Dai Khao (White) and Dai Ya (Multi-coloured). Zhuang, Buyi and Dong are also classified as Tai speakers in the PRC.
3. Gregory Eliyu Guldin, ed. *Anthropology in China. Defining the Discipline* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), 45.
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Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue. Observations and Suggestions from a Christian Perspective

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From Encounter to Dialogue

While Muslim-Buddhist encounter is in fact quite old,¹ Muslim-Buddhist dialogue seems to be rather young. We do not really know which kind of perhaps serious and penetrating dialogues might have taken place during the rapidly progressing expansion of early Islam towards the East. There are signs and indices that Muslims, in particular Sufis, were at times under Buddhist influence to which they apparently replied positively. But as far as I am aware, there are no records of any dialogue in which both partners would have tried to understand each other as they understood themselves and let that kind of understanding have an impact on their own religious views. Instead there are several cases displaying an application of false — or at least highly problematic — categories on the religious other with partly fateful consequences resulting from that.

One of the early Sufis, Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. c. 790 CE?), lived in Balkh (“Bactra”), which had been the capital of Buddhist Bactria before its conquest by the Muslims. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who visited Balkh in the 7th century CE provided a lively image of its flourishing Buddhist culture.² Not just Ibrāhīm ibn Adham’s life-style of voluntary poverty and chastity but also the tradition that he had left his father’s palace and chosen the life of an ascetic could very well reflect Buddhist influence.³ Other indications of possible Buddhist influence on Sufis have been pointed out,⁴ but we don’t have any direct evidence of an interest of Sufis in Buddhist teachings or practice that would parallel, for example, the relatively strong Muslim interest in Yoga.⁵

A number of medieval Muslim authors as al-Kermāni, al-Nadīm, Istakhri and, most famously, al-Bīrūnī (10/11 CE) did touch upon Buddhism in their writings, yet what they relate is nowhere near to being accurate. This is to some extent different with al-Shahrastānī (c. 1076–1153 CE) who sketches a comparatively detailed picture of Buddhist teachings and points out a certain nearness between Buddhist and Sufi ideas. However, this hardly had any impact on what was apparently the main Muslim view of Buddhism, namely, that it suffers “from the twin evils of idolatry, through its use of richly decorated visual statues and paintings; and of atheism, through not having a theistic God at the centre of their religious system.”⁶ As “idolatry” Buddhism was identified with that

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sort of religious behavior against which the message of the true prophets was directed. Even in the fairly late (i.e. 13th ct. CE) account of Rashīd al-Dīn, which was written with the assistance of a Buddhist monk, it was claimed that the idol worshippers of ancient Mecca had been Buddhists.⁷ The word “Buddha” itself — in form of the Persian *but* — became equivalent to “idol.”⁸ According to Jacques Waardenburg, these cases illustrate a common mechanism:

In *kalām*, a particular theoretical position is refuted and may then be attributed to a specific group of poorly-known non-Muslims. This is done not because it was known that they held this doctrine in reality but simply in order to predicate a hypothetical doctrine to a little known group of outsiders.⁹

On the Buddhist side the knowledge of Islam — despite centuries of living side-by-side at various places in Asia — has not been significantly better. As Alexander Berzin states: “. . . there was hardly any Buddhist interest in learning about the teachings of Islam,”¹⁰ the only exception being the Kālacakra literature which displays some knowledge about certain Islamic beliefs and practices¹¹ but again shows the application of categories that simply don’t match the other, e.g., when it understands Muhammad as an incarnation of God, along the lines of Hindu ideas of an *avatāra*, or when it criticizes the Muslim eschatological goal by misinterpreting it through the Buddhist category of a heavenly, but nevertheless still *saṃsāric*, rebirth.¹² “Any interaction between the two peoples” — summarizes Berzin — “was based on very little knowledge of each other’s belief.”¹³ But this, unfortunately, did not prevent both sides from applying their own often negative categories upon each other — in fact, it even helped that. However, if we look at the enormous amount of literature produced in the course of the frequent Buddhist-Hindu controversies at roughly the same time (with an earlier start, of course), we find that mutual knowledge of each other’s tradition is indeed significantly better, but that this is not necessarily accompanied by a better understanding. The religious other is studied not in order to learn his point of view and see the possible truth that he might see, but in order to identify any supposed or real weaknesses, to defeat him in polemical debate and carry away — at least from one’s own perspective — the apologetic victory.¹⁴

The nature of dialogue would be to refrain from all this, or putting it positively, to study the religious tradition of the other carefully and to learn about the other *from* the other without applying *a priori* one’s own preconceived categories; to understand at first the other’s auto-interpretation (his self-understanding) before developing the inevitable hetero-interpretation (the interpretation of the other from one’s own religious perspective);¹⁵ and to allow that his or her insights may question or enlarge one’s own ones as much as *vice versa*. Today, dialogues in that sense have indeed begun, although the traditional habit of determining *a priori* what the one purportedly has to be in the eyes of the other is unfortunately not yet a matter of the past.¹⁶

Among contemporary Buddhist-Muslim dialogues there are four that deserve special attention: *First* there is the series of international dialogues which started in 2002 and was

initiated by the Buddhist Dharma Master Hsin Tao as a reaction to the destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan in 2001 and the events of 9/11.¹⁷ *Second* there is the extensive dialogue between the Muslim political scientist Majjid Tehranian and the Buddhist Soka Gakkai leader Daisaku Ikeda documented in their book “Global Civilization.”¹⁸ *Third*, there are dialogues in Thailand in response to the ongoing violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in the South of the country.¹⁹ Finally, there is the persistent, not often noticed, dialogical exchange and reflection within the so-called “Traditional School.”²⁰ Of course, there are other cases of dialogical or pre-dialogical encounters and constructive relations as well.²¹ And in particular there will presumably be cases of what Raimundo Panikkar once appropriately called the “intra-religious dialogue,”²² that is, Muslims and Buddhists who in their own hearts and minds feel the spiritual strength of the other’s religion and try to combine this with what they have learned from or through their own tradition. While the latter might well be the most interesting development, not much can be said about it presently, whereas the four dialogues just mentioned permit some (hopefully) non-trivial observations that may be of some help in shaping the future course of Buddhist-Muslim encounter.

From Dialogue to Learning

If one looks at the first three of the said dialogues, it seems fair to state that they display a striking imbalance: whereas much effort is put in investigating common ethical ground and finding common visions in relation to communal violence, economic and social injustice, the ecological crisis, globalization, etc., comparatively little is done in order to explore possible common ground in doctrinal or “theological” issues — “theology” of course here in the broader sense in which Buddhists too can refer to the intellectual reflection and reconstruction of their teachings.²³

During the dialogue at Columbia University 2002, which was the first one in the series of the international dialogues, Imam Feisal A. Rauf made various attempts to put the question of the relation between the Muslim and the Buddhist understanding of ultimate reality on the agenda, but more or less failed.²⁴ Although David Chappell, a Buddhist, replied in making a brief reference to the Buddhist concept of *dharmakāya* as a possible correlate to God,²⁵ he later explained, when referring back to this during the dialogue session in Paris in 2003, that “Buddhists are a little awkward when asked about divinity,” and admitted that he had “tried to deflect it.”²⁶ The topic never regained any centrality in the further dialogues of this series. Daisaku Ikeda and Majjid Tehranian explicitly located their dialogue within the context of their perception “that the religious spirit has been steadily waning in our time”²⁷ and their agreement “that Buddhism and Islam . . . offer their prescriptions.”²⁸ But they remained vague in specifying what “the religious spirit” and its “prescriptions” might mean theologically. Both expressed their endorsement of Tillich’s idea that the “courage to be” needs to be grounded in the “concern for the ultimate,”²⁹ but for the rest of the dialogue this is spelled out primarily in ethical terms: cultivating a spirit of openness, dialogue and respect for difference, of

non-violence and conflict-resolution, and the search for common values. Given the high toll of casualties that the ongoing violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in southern Thailand have demanded, it is quite appropriate that the focus of Buddhist-Muslim dialogues in Thailand has been on the concrete measures that can be taken to stop the killing and to arrive at a durable peace. The “Dusit Declaration,” which emerged from a dialogue in Bangkok in 2006, however, also emphasized the need for promoting a better knowledge and understanding of the religion of the other in order to “eliminate prejudices, hatreds and misconceptions that sometimes tend to separate the two communities.”³⁰ But can prejudices and misconceptions be overcome if dialogue avoids the area of theological reflection?

When posing the question why Buddhist-Muslim dialogue so far has been relatively silent in that regard, several possible answers might spring to one’s mind:

One possible explanation might be the fear that dialogue of a more theological nature would be too much in danger of falling back to traditional controversy and the past mistake of applying unfitting categories, even if these were of a more well-meaning nature. During a Buddhist-Muslim dialogue in Thailand in November 2005 hosted by Mahidol University, the apparently friendly attempt, from the Muslim side, of describing the Buddha as a “prophet” or “messenger” provoked the remark of a seemingly offended Buddhist participant “that such ideas would be allowed ‘within this seminar room,’ but ‘outside this room, it will bring about grave consequences.’”³¹ The chairperson immediately stopped the discussion.

Another, related explanation might be that both sides regard their doctrinal differences as irreconcilable and do not really see any use in making these the object of dialogue, or worse, they may even fear that this might have counterproductive, i.e., divisive results. In view of the astonishing traditional disinterest of Buddhist authors in Islamic teachings, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the agreement between Buddhism and Islam on the “indispensable role” of “ethical behaviour” in the Kālacakra literature, Alexander Berzin has clearly opted for ethical consensus as the major aim of contemporary Buddhist-Muslim dialogue.³² This view is in line with the general approach to interfaith dialogue and cooperation taken by the “World Conference of Religions for Peace.”³³ It is a legitimate and valuable approach which I am not questioning. My question is only, if — in the long run — it is really possible to avoid the question of religious truth for the sake of ethical consensus. Or will the unresolved issue of truth hang like a Damoclean sword over any possible agreement in the field of morality?

During the dialogue in Paris 2003, Venerable Dagyo Rinpoche emphasized the doctrinal divergence between those who affirm the existence of a creator God, e.g., Muslims, and those who reject it, e.g., Buddhists, as an “undeniable” fact. However, despite the fact that Buddhists “do not admit the notion of a creator God” they would, according to Dagyo Rinpoche, nevertheless consider this notion as “very precious” because of its usefulness in encouraging people to live a morally good life.³⁴ This argument obviously follows the position taken in the Kālacakra tradition, but it has its severe problems. Firstly, it clearly presupposes that the belief of the other is wrong in its

central tenet. If, however, the pursuit of truth is of the essence in any religious path, this kind of patronizing generosity that grants the other some false beliefs as long as they are beneficial, cannot be in any way satisfactory — and will certainly not convince the religious other. Secondly, not all Buddhists will agree in the morally positive function of the belief in a divine creator. On the contrary, from past to present it has been a standard objection in Buddhist criticism of divine creation that obedience to a creator God is highly questionable precisely because it might serve as a justification for morally wrong behavior.³⁵ Thirdly, this kind of approach does not really reckon with the possibility that through dialogue itself new light might be shed on what is traditionally regarded as unbridgeable differences. Yet dialogue is, among else, an opportunity to learn that the “other is much richer, has greater resources, is much more interesting than our stereotyped images are,” as Alon Goshen-Gottstein expressed it so aptly on the same occasion.³⁶

The imbalance between ethical and theological dialogue may therefore be explained by an underestimation of the theological potential of dialogue itself: dialogue can be perceived as merely an opportunity where people meet and exchange their religious beliefs but is not really seen as an opportunity through which they might learn, deepen, and transform precisely in relation to what they believe — not only about each other but also with regard to their very own personal convictions. If dialogue is not granted this capacity it is more or less reduced to an instrument of diplomatic crisis-management. This is apparent in a statement made by Venerable Vijaya Samaravickrama during the dialogue in Kuala Lumpur 2002. Relating to the situation in Malaysia, he held that in the past both Hinduism and Buddhism (allegedly) had been so “comfortable” with Islam “that we never had the need for a formal dialogue. It is a sad comment on the times that we need to sit here and dialogue and ask ourselves how we can now live together . . .” Apparently he could not see any other purpose in interfaith dialogue than this sort of crisis-management and quite consistently he thus remarked that “certain things on the spiritual level and doctrinal level, like the belief in God, the belief in a soul and the belief in an after-life (. . .) are not up for discussion,” but need to remain a matter of “privacy.”³⁷

In her extremely important study on the conditions of fruitful interfaith dialogue, Catherine Cornille emphasizes a different understanding of dialogue in which dialogue is seen as a source of theological learning. However:

Though openness toward the possibility of discovering truth in teachings and practices different from one’s own thus constitutes an essential condition for a constructive dialogue, religions are not on the whole inclined to such hospitality. Most religious faith is based on a belief in the fullness and sufficiency of one’s own religious teachings and practices. The very idea that other religions might harbor truth that has not yet been captured within one’s own tradition may thus be experienced as a threat to one’s own epistemic and religious confidence.³⁸

Cornille’s sobering observation raises the question whether there are resources within Islam and Buddhism that could counter the kind of self-sufficiency which

otherwise prevents them from seeing dialogue not only as an opportunity for learning about each other but also for learning in theologically relevant ways from each other. It is here where the fourth strand of dialogue mentioned above, the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue as it is going on for a longer time in the Traditional School, comes in. In his remarkable little book “Treasures of Buddhism,” Frithjof Schuon formulates a kind of hermeneutical ground rule:

The first question to be asked concerning any doctrine or tradition is that of its intrinsic orthodoxy; that is to say one must know whether that tradition is consonant, not necessarily with another given traditionally orthodox perspective, but simply with Truth. As far as Buddhism is concerned, we will not ask therefore whether . . . its ‘non-theism’ — and not ‘atheism!’ — is reconcilable in its expression with Semitic theism or any other, but only whether Buddhism is true in itself; which means, if the answer is affirmative, . . . that its non-theism will express the Truth, or a sufficient and efficacious aspect of the Truth, whereof theism provides another possible expression, opportune in the world it governs.³⁹

The important point here is that *at first* the religious other needs to be understood in his or her own right, and with the serious interest of identifying any possible truth in the life and faith of the religious other — or, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith would have put it, that we try to see the world, as far as possible, through the eyes of the other so that we might also see that truth in the universe that he, through the lens of his religious tradition, was able to discern.⁴⁰ Only *after* this step has been taken (and we will have to go back to this starting point again and again), the theological work can begin of how to relate the truth of the other to the truth of one’s own tradition — and this will be a truly creative and innovative type of theology, for through it we move into uncharted territory.

But what if our tradition would tell us that there is no truth to be discerned in other religions? Well, then dialogue might prove that in this regard our tradition was apparently wrong. Yet as far as Islam and Buddhism are concerned, there are some powerful teachings which do indeed support the possibility, up to the degree of a probability, that there is truth — and even to some extent new, hitherto unknown truth — to be discovered outside the walls of one’s own “house.”

As far as Islam is concerned, it has been pointed out repeatedly that according to the Holy Qur’ān, God has sent messengers to every people, so that divine revelation has always been spread throughout the world. The crucial question, however, is whether this also implies that there might be gained some new insights from the revelation dispersed around the globe. An affirmative answer is supported by the idea that messengers serve as mediators of divine revelation in a way that is appropriate to the respective people. For this entails that the forms and ways of revelation will be as diverse as humanity actually is: “every message is unique, since each is given to a prophet ‘in the tongue of his people,’ ” argues William Chittick.⁴¹ Moreover, each of these messages is in its particular form inevitably limited, and none of these forms will ever be able to exhaust divine infinity: “And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with

seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the words of Allah be exhausted . . ." (Sūra 31:27, cp. 18:109). This combination of the diversity and limitedness of revelation in relation to the oneness and infiniteness of its transcendent source is precisely what allows for the possibility of complementarity, mutual enrichment and reciprocal fertilization. The well-known Ḥadīth "Seek knowledge, even unto China," would not make any sense at all, if one were to assume that the Qur'ān already contains everything that is worth knowing. According to the Muslim theologian Mahmut Aydin, a Muslim can and should therefore maintain that the revelation in the Qur'ān as one of those finite media is indeed "universal, decisive, and indispensable," but is not "full, definitive, and unsurpassable":

First, Muslims cannot claim that they possess the fullness of divine revelation in the Qur'ān, as if it exhausted all the truth that God has to reveal, since, theologically speaking, no created medium can exhaust the fullness of the Infinite. Second, Muslims cannot consider the Qur'ān to be the definitive word of God as if there could be no other norms for the divine truth outside it. This means that the Qur'ān is the Word of God but not in the sense that there are not other Words of God. Third, Muslims cannot consider God's revelation in the Qur'ān as unsurpassable in the sense that God could not reveal Godself in other ways apart from the Qur'ān at other times.⁴²

Consequently, Aydin does see interfaith dialogue as a genuine source of theology, i.e., "interreligious encounter means that the shape of Muslim theology will be influenced by dialogue with other religions."⁴³

On the Buddhist side I feel it is more difficult to identify doctrinal resources that counter religious self-sufficiency and open up space for interreligious learning. Particularly in Theravāda-Buddhism, a major obstacle is the idea that there can be only one Buddha per world system — and, moreover, that the teaching of all Buddhas will always be the same. This is somewhat different in Mahāyāna where at least some schools seem to allow for the presence of different Buddhas at the same time and also acknowledge more strongly than Theravāda a legitimate diversity of teachings, as for example in the well-known idea of 84,000 different Dharma gates adapted to the rich diversity of people and their respective forms of delusion. But Theravāda could perhaps interpret the "one world/one Buddha"-doctrine as a mythological expression in praise of the greatness of the historical Buddha. As a matter of fact, there have been contemporary Theravāda-Buddhist thinkers such as, for example, Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa, who made doctrinal space for a positive view of religious diversity. The basis for doing so was the closeness he perceived between *dhamma* and God. So, as a Buddhist, he referred to the Qur'ānic statement that there is a messenger for every people (Sūra 10:47) and did not only apply this to the teaching of the Buddha⁴⁴ but also developed from this his view that the differences between the religions are due to different socio-cultural circumstances.⁴⁵ He saw Buddhism as a religion that emphasizes "wisdom," while in Christianity "faith" and in Islam "will-power" (as equivalent to Buddhist *virīya*) are dominant. But each of

the three religions, says Buddhādāsa, comprises also the other two aspects, so that none could be seen as seriously deficient.⁴⁶

In Mahāyāna contemporary thinkers like Lama John Makransky have highlighted the significance of the Avataṃsaka philosophy for the development of a Buddhist understanding of other religions.⁴⁷ It is the basic notion of mutual interdependence and interpenetration of the totality of being and of each individual aspect of it that, in conjunction with the belief that this is the way Buddha-Nature is real, makes room for the idea that this Buddha-Nature is accessible and manifest in a huge variety of forms:

Just as the ocean water flows under the continents and islands, so that all who drill for water find it, . . . in the same way the water of Buddha's ocean of knowledge flows into the minds of sentient beings, so that if they examine things and practice ways of entering truth, they will find knowledge, pure and clear, with lucid understanding . . .⁴⁸

Seen against the background of such ideas, it might be no surprise that Dharma Master Hsin Tao, the initiator of the international Muslim-Buddhist dialogues, is himself deeply influenced by the Avataṃsaka teachings.

From Learning to Sharing

As early as 1982, Thomas Cleary, who translated both, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra and the Qur'ān, argued that the Avataṃsaka philosophy would not only be suitable to "account for . . . the variety of religions in the whole human community,"⁴⁹ but also resonates with a number of ontological views found in Sufism. And in a series of essays written in the seventies of the 20th century, the Buddhist specialist in Sufism, Toshiko Izutsu, made the same point.⁵⁰ Yet there is a further implication in this which neither Izutsu nor Cleary address: if Buddha-Nature is manifest not in and as itself but in and as the interrelatedness and interpenetration of all phenomena, this does create not only theological space for interreligious learning but also for interreligious sharing. But regardless of whether or not one agrees with the Avataṃsaka philosophy, learning from the religious other is already a form of sharing in his/her insight, understanding, experience, skill, or practice.

This takes us back to the question of what kind of truth Muslims can discern in Buddhism, and Buddhists in Islam. Is this, as dialogue so far seems to suggest, only truth of a moral nature? If not, how then relate Buddhism and Islam to each other theologically? Are there good reasons for Muslims to assume that Buddhists are in contact with the same reality that Islam calls "Allah" and for Buddhists that Muslims are in contact with what Buddhism calls *nirvāṇa*, or *dharmakāya* or *dharmadhātu*? Once more, Schuon's remark is important that Buddhism is non-theistic but not atheistic (see above at fn. 39). This implies that Buddhism does not deny a transcendent, unconditioned reality. On the contrary, this is precisely how *nirvāṇa* has been traditionally defined: it is called *lokuttara* (beyond the world) and *asamskṛta* (not-conditioned). The idea that *nirvāṇa* would be merely a state, the state of the enlightened person, is

explicitly rejected in such influential classical treatises as the *Milindapañha* (269f) or the *Visuddhimagga* (507ff), for it would entail that the existence of *nirvāṇa* is conditioned by the completion of the Noble Eightfold Path. But *nirvāṇa* is unconditioned, and hence it exists whether someone attains it or not. Its unconditioned existence beyond the worlds of *samsāra* is what makes it possible for someone to attain to *nirvāṇa* and thereby achieve salvation/liberation from *samsāra*.⁵¹

Important as these observations are, they do not tell us how to relate Allah and *nirvāṇa* or *dharmakāya* positively to each other. Can they simply be identified, as it apparently happened for some time in China, when Chinese Muslims used “Buddha” (presumably in his *dharmakāya* aspect) as an equivalent for Allah?⁵² I feel that in this crucial area of dialogical inquiry Buddhist-Muslim dialogue could benefit from the theological work that has been done in the course of Christian-Buddhist dialogue.⁵³ Let me cut a long story short. I think that the Christian concepts and the Buddhist concepts of naming transcendence can neither be identified (for that would ignore the specific and different meanings that these notions have within their genuine religious contexts) nor can they be completely set apart, for this would neglect that they do in fact refer to an unconditioned transcendent reality; nor can they be seen as referring to different transcendent realities,⁵⁴ for this would ignore that a reality which transcends everything has to be one — the major insight behind *tawhīd*. What seems to me the most promising and hermeneutically most persuading solution is to understand these names, concepts, and notions as being related to different experiences, but experiences which can be legitimately interpreted as different experiences with the same transcendent reality⁵⁵ — a reality which as both Islam and Buddhism teach, is also immanent (“nearer to us than our jugular vein”; Sūra 50:16) and therefore experientiable. In itself, however, this reality is beyond description: “And there is none like unto Him” (Sūra 112:4) — “I shall go there . . . I shall go beyond comparison” (Sutta Nipāta 1149). If both Muslims and Buddhists agree that transcendent reality is incomparable and therefore ineffable, then all the many words that have in fact been made in both traditions may probably be best understood not as referring to this reality in itself but to different aspects that transcendent reality takes in its relation to us, in its immanence, and hence reflect the multitude of ways in which human beings have become aware of it and experienced it. Buddhist-Muslim dialogue, I suggest, may proceed fruitfully if both sides explore how the respective *experiences* connected with the different attributes, which both give to their concepts of transcendence, relate to each other.

But can these experiences also be shared? In the history of Christian-Buddhist dialogue a particularly crucial and vital impulse came and continues to come from those Christians who submitted themselves to Buddhist meditation practice and experienced that this not only opened an exquisite door for a better understanding of Buddhism but also deepened, enriched and transformed their own Christian spirituality.⁵⁶ Conversely, for many years Buddhists have found it an enriching experience to share the life of Christian monks,⁵⁷ and individual Buddhists even report about the spiritual benefits that

they have gained from passively (or even actively?) participating in the Christian Eucharist.⁵⁸

Is something similar possible between Buddhism and Islam? It is beyond my knowledge whether Muslims have practiced Buddhist forms of meditation and what their experiences might have been. But I assume that such experiences might exist. The various recent statements against Muslims practicing Yoga⁵⁹ seem to indicate that there is willingness on the side of some Muslims to move into this direction. Conversely, I don't know whether any Buddhists are prepared to participate in Muslim spiritual practices or have even done so. It would certainly add a new dimension to the kind of interreligious learning at which dialogue, in its theological dimension, should aim. Muslims could then testify from their own experience that these practices will not relate them to "a different god" but to that One Reality which alone is God. And Buddhists might discover by their own experience that Muslim practice — apart from their ethics — is not just dwelling in delusion but is indeed another profound "dharma gate."

In the further course of such imaginable developments both might also find new ways of creating theological space for the central features of the other religion as they are represented in their central figures. Seeing the Buddha as a prophet or divine messenger has a longer tradition among those Muslims who were not fully comfortable with the understanding of Buddhism as merely a mix of idolatry and atheism. At times the Buddha was then identified with the prophet Dhu'l-kifl mentioned in Sūra 21:85f and 38:48.⁶⁰ This needs to be seen as a positive and well-meaning move, so that any Buddhist embarrassment about it would not really be in place. The risk, however, is that such a perception of the Buddha might miss the understanding of the Buddha within Buddhism itself. Going back to Schuon's rule: It is important first to understand what the Buddha means to Buddhists and then raise the question to what extent this can be sufficiently grasped by the categories of a prophet or messenger, or if the Buddha is perhaps a "messenger" of its own type, or whether his spiritual significance needs to be expressed in entirely different, maybe new, categories. But this would include asking how that what the Buddha stands for resonates with Islam: first, the *perfection of wisdom*, which on the one hand is transcendent but on the other hand can only be found by following one's own individual insight, second, the *perfection of compassion*, which excludes no one and no sentient being, and third the *inseparable union of wisdom and compassion*.

As much as the Buddhist category of the Buddha, i.e., the accomplished Bodhisattva, is alien to Islam, the category of the Prophet is unknown to Buddhism. And once again, just graciously seeing Muhammad as a Bodhisattva or even a Buddha might arise from well-meaning intentions but would be in danger of missing the specific meaning of prophethood in Islam. So here too the question is whether Buddhism is willing to expand its own religious horizon in order to incorporate something new. In 1993, the Buddhist feminist and scholar Rita Gross argued that Buddhism should learn from the Abrahamic traditions by integrating something like "the prophetic voice."⁶¹ This, as she explained later, has since been met with a lot of criticism on the Buddhist side. But

Gross defends her view that “the Buddhist emphasis on compassion and the Christian prophetic emphasis on justice and righteousness . . . are subtly but significantly different from each other, and have a good bit to say to each other.”⁶² This assessment can be easily expanded to the “prophetic voice” in Islam. In his notable speech at the Buddhist-Muslim dialogue in Bangkok in 2006, Phra Paisan Visalo expressed a similar view when saying: “As a Buddhist, I think we can learn a lot from Muslim people, especially about cultivating a sense of justice . . .”⁶³

Within both traditions, Islam and Buddhism, the Prophet and the Buddha have been given a sort of archetypal status as supreme examples of manifesting the true essence of humanity, as pointed out by Imtiyaz Yusuf. This recognition could lead, as Yusuf suggests, to mutual appreciation.⁶⁴ If this appreciation was accompanied by a full recognition of how both of these archetypal figures differ and thereby complement each other, it would result in genuine cross-fertilization.

From Sharing to Encounter

The deeper we move into interfaith dialogue through mutual understanding, learning and sharing, we will also become aware of the wider interrelatedness of our viewpoints: The Buddhists’ “awkwardness” — to quote David Chappell again — with “divinity,” which persistently reappears in their dialogue with Christians, Muslims or Jews, goes back to the Buddhist difficulties with the various Hindu concepts of God.⁶⁵ The traditional Buddhist criticism of Hinduism still shapes their (skeptical or even hostile) perception of the God-language in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The distortions resulting from this are to a significant extent rooted in traditional Buddhist-Hindu polemical misconceptions of the religious other — whatever the motives for this may have been. Any progress in dialogue between Buddhism and the Abrahamic religions should therefore also lead to a reconsideration of the Buddhist-Hindu relationships and hopefully to a serious dialogue between them, for this has not yet really started.

But then any Buddhist-Hindu dialogue, inspired perhaps by Buddhist-Christian, Buddhist-Muslim or Buddhist-Jewish dialogue, could in the long run not ignore what has been said and theologically thought in dialogue between Hindus and Christians, Hindus and Muslims, or Hindus and Jews, which then again has its repercussions on their perception of Buddhism. For example, Jews, Christians and Muslims have likewise traditionally perceived Hinduism as polytheism and idolatry. But in 2007 a dialogue between a delegation from the chief rabbinate of Jerusalem and a high profile group of various Hindu leaders signed a joint declaration that “their respective traditions teach that there is One Supreme Being who is the Ultimate Reality. . . .”⁶⁶ After this the accusation of “polytheism” and “idolatry” is no longer justified. If, however, Jews and Christians and Muslims agree that they believe in the same God, this new Jewish understanding of sharing monotheism with Hinduism must be important to Christians and Muslims as well. Similarly, what happens in Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian

dialogue is important to Jews and Christians or Jews and Muslims. And this also creates a new setting for reviewing the Buddhist understanding of Ultimate Reality in relation to Hinduism and its exploration in dialogue with the Abrahamic religions.

Moreover, what Jews develop theologically in dialogue with Buddhists and what Christians learn from their dialogue with Buddhists will also have its impact on the relation between Jews and Christian or between Jews and Christian and Muslims as far as Muslims too develop their theological understanding in Buddhist-Muslim dialogue. And to all of this the voice of China will have to make its own contribution — for it is here that the encounter of Confucianism and Daoism with Buddhism, Christianity and Islam has a long tradition that will shed further light on a number of issues.

No doubt, there needs to be room for bilateral interfaith dialogue where two traditions can explore in more detail (and somehow “undisturbed”) everything that is important between them. But what has been said before shows that these bilateral dialogues are not really taking place in isolation. This illustrates the interconnectedness of everything, which is such an important theme in Buddhism. But it also shows that because of this interconnectedness, interfaith dialogue will lead us to new forms of interreligious encounter. In the course of this encounter the religious other will no longer be the kind of “other” that our traditions often thought he or she was. We will know and see each other, hopefully, in a way that is closer to how we see ourselves. But as I tried to show, this very process will also transform us, so that we will no longer be exactly the same that we were before. We will encounter some new and other “otherness” through which we will see what each of us is learning from all of us.

Endnotes

1. Cp. the excellent overviews in Daniel Gimaret, “Bouddha et les Bouddhistes dans la tradition Musulmane,” *Journal Asiatique* 257 (1969): 273–316; David Scott, “Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters and Interfaith Lessons,” *Numen* 42 (1995): 141–155; Alexander Berzin, “A Buddhist View of Islam,” in *Islam and Inter-Faith Relations*, eds. P. Schmidt-Leukel, L. Ridgeon (London: SCM Press, 2007), 225–251; Alexander Berzin, “Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions*, ed. P. Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2008), 212–236.

2. *Si-Yu-Ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World*. Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang AD 629, by Samuel Beal (London: Trubner & Co 1884), vol. 2, 309f.

3. David Scott, “Buddhism and Islam . . .”, 146; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam. Die Geschichte des Sufismus* (2nd edn. München: Eugen Diederichs Verlag 1992), 64.

4. Cp. David Scott, “Buddhism and Islam . . .”, 146f.

5. On this see Carl W. Ernst, “Sufism and Yoga According to Muhammad Ghawth,” *Sufi* 29 (1996): 9–13.

6. David Scott, “Buddhism and Islam . . .”, 143.

7. Cp. Alexander Berzin, “Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations,” 218.

8. Cp. David Scott, “Buddhism and Islam . . .”, 143f.

9. Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others. Relations in Context* (Berlin — New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 172.

10. Alexander Berzin, “A Buddhist View of Islam,” 229.

11. Cp. the detailed information in Berzin, "A Buddhist View of Islam," 230–245.
12. Cp. Berzin, "Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations," 215.
13. Berzin, "A Buddhist View of Islam," 227.
14. Cp. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Buddhist-Hindu Relations" in *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions*, ed. P. Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2008), 143–171.
15. This terminology had been introduced by Piet Schoonenberg in 1974.
16. The well known German scholar of religion Gustav Mensching, for example, has in his book "Der offene Tempel" from 1974, which deals with the dialogue between the major religions, also chapters on "Buddhism and Islam" and on "Islam's Critique of Buddhism and Hinduism." But everything he writes is without any reference to actual statements of Buddhists on Islam or Muslims on Buddhists. It is entirely derived from what Mensching feels that they would have to say about each other.
17. *Listening. Buddhist-Muslim Dialogues 2002–04*, eds. Bhikkuni Liao Yi, Maria R. Habito (Taipei: Museum of World Religions 2005), 122. For the ongoing dialogues in this series see the website: <http://www.gflp.org/Buddhist-Muslim.html>.
18. Daisaku Ikeda, Majid Tehranian, *Global Civilization. A Buddhist-Islamic Dialogue* (London — New York: British Academic Press 2003).
19. See on this the various contributions in *Seeds of Peace* 22 (2006) no. 3.
20. Several Muslim scholars have been inspired by this school, in particular by the ideas of Frithjof Schuon, as for example Seyyed Hossein Nasr or William Chittick. A well-know Buddhist belonging to this school has been Marco Pallis.
21. Cp. the overview in Berzin, "A Buddhist View of Islam," 245–251, and Berzin, "Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations," 222–227.
22. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press 1978).
23. See for example Roger Jackson & John Makransky (eds.), *Buddhist Theology. Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (London: Curzon 2000).
24. Cp. *Listening*, 28–61.
25. *Ibid.* 45.
26. *Ibid.* 185.
27. Ikeda & Tehranian, *Global Civilization*, 51.
28. *Ibid.* 53.
29. *Ibid.* 55.
30. *Seeds of Peace* 22 (2006), 23.
31. Teddy Prasetyo, "Thailand: Buddhism-Islam dialogue aimed at ending violence and promoting greater religious understanding". *Current Dialogue* 46 (2005), 56–58, 57.
32. Cp. Berzin, "A Buddhist View of Islam," 245; Berzin, "Buddhist-Muslim Doctrinal Relations," 227, 233.
33. Cp. Norbert Klaes, "Peace and Multireligious Co-operation: The World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP)," in *War and Peace in World Religions*, ed. by P. Schmidt-Leukel (London: SCM 2004), 199–224.
34. *Listening*, 312f.
35. Cp. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "The Unbridgeable Gulf? Towards a Buddhist-Christian Theology of Creation," in *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation. Karmic or Divine?* Ed. by P. Schmidt-Leukel (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006), 109–178, 140f.
36. *Listening*, 204.
37. *Ibid.* 78.
38. Catherine Cornille, *The im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Herder & Herder 2008), 178.
39. Frithjof Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books 1993), 18.
40. Cp. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1979), 137.

41. William C. Chittick, "A Sufi Approach to Religious Diversity. Ibn al-'Arabī on the Metaphysics of Revelation", in *Religion of the Heart. Essays Presented to Frithjof Schuon on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. by S.H. Nasr and W. Stoddart (Foundation for Traditional Studies: Washington 1991), 50–90, 52.
42. Mahmut Aydin, "Religious Pluralism: A Challenge for Muslims — A Theological Evaluation," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38 (2001) 330–352, 349; cp. also Mahmut Aydin, "Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths. A Muslim View," in *Islam and Inter-Faith Relations*, eds. P. Schmidt-Leukel, L. Ridgeon (London: SCM Press, 2007), 33–54, 49–53.
43. Aydin, "Religious Pluralism," 352.
44. Buddhādāsa Indapañño, *Christianity and Buddhism*. Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture. Fifth Series (Bangkok 1967), 8.
45. *Ibid.* 13.
46. *Ibid.* 12f. In this context it is worth mentioning that Buddhādāsa entertained a close spiritual friendship with the Muslim Haji Prayoon Vadanyakul, see <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=52,3087,0,0,1,0>. I'm grateful to Mrs. Leyla Jagiella who pointed this out.
47. Cp. John Makransky, "Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections Toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions" in *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions*, ed. P. Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2008), 47–68, 55–66.
48. Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture. A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston — London: Shambala 1993), 999.
49. Thomas Cleary, "Buddhism and Islam," *Transactions of the International Conference of Orientalists in Japan* 27 (1982), 31–38, 35.
50. Toshihiko Izutzu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things. Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press 1994). The volume comprises seven essays, most of which were first published in the early seventies.
51. Cp. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press 2006b), 48–52.
52. Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: SUNY 2000), 18.
53. For a (nearly) comprehensive overview see Michael von Brück, Whalen Lai, *Buddhismus und Christentum. Geschichte, Konfrontation, Dialog* (München: Beck Verlag 1997), for a brief summary Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Intimate Strangers: An Introduction," in *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*, ed. by P. Schmidt-Leukel (London: SCM 2005), 1–26.
54. This of course, this is what process theologians try to do, so they would contradict me. Cp. David Ray Griffin (ed.), *Deep Religious Pluralism* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox 2005).
55. Cp. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration. How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM 2009), 107–145. The epistemological foundation for this view is best expounded in John Hick's seminal work *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1989).
56. One only needs to mention the names of Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle or Thomas Merton. See also Diana Eck, *Encountering God. A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 144–165.
57. For inter-monastic dialogue see: <http://monasticdialog.com/index.php>
58. Cp. John Makransky, "Buddha and Christ as Mediators of the Transcendent. A Buddhist Perspective," in *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*, ed. by P. Schmidt-Leukel (London: SCM 2005), 176–199, 178–180; Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books 1995), 30ff; Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books 1999), 106ff.
59. <http://www.hvk.org/articles/0904/35.html>; <http://theyee.ca/Life/2009/03/13/Yoga/>
60. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Der Islam," in *Innenansichten der großen Religionen*, ed. by Arvind Sharma (Frankfurt A.M.: Fischer 1997), 134f.

61. Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy. A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY 1993), 132ff.
62. Rita M. Gross & Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet. A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* (London — New York: Continuum 2001), 164.
63. Phra Paisan Visalo, "On the Path toward Peace and Justice: Challenges Confronting Buddhists and Muslims," *Seeds of Peace* 22 (2006), no. 3, 15–20, 20.
64. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Dialogue between Islam and Buddhism through the Concepts of *Tathagata* and *Nur Mubammadi*," *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* 5 (2005): 105–114, 112.
65. Cp. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "The Unbridgeable Gulf?". and Schmidt-Leukel, "Buddhist-Hindu Relations".
66. <http://www.yogaindailylife.org/articles/show.asp?id=20070211001>.