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Unity of Buddhism and Hinduism

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Unity of Buddhism and Hinduism in experience and teachings of the Dalai Lama

By

Edmund Weber

The Dalai Lama, in exile since 1959 in Hindu majority India, has continuously been taking a firm stand on giving importance to an inter-religious dialogue and interaction. He has made it absolutely clear that Buddhism represents just one of the many religious ways open for mankind. Nonetheless, he has always referred to the bond shared between Buddhism and Hinduism as a very special one and has experienced it as a religious tie. Both these religious streams belong to what is known as Bharatiya or Indo-genous Dharma. The Dalai Lama does not restrict his care for nurturing this common bond to a mere academic talk. In fact he has been taking active part in promoting this kind of inter-religious dialogue and has been showing a fiery political commitment as well.

He thus took active part in the second World Hindu Congress organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad held in Prayag-Allahabad in the year 1979. According to official reports, the organizers in their welcome speech for the Dalai Lama were frank enough to admit that 2500 years ago, the Kashi Pandits (Kashi also known as Varanasi) had stopped Siddharta Gautama Buddha from entering the Vishwanath temple. It was also mentioned that for all these years, there has never been any let-up in the conflict between Sanatani Hindus and Bauddhas, despite the fact that later on Shakya Muni was rewarded the status of avatara by Hindus. The fact that these very Kashi Pandits had invited one of the highest religious authorities of Buddhism - the Dalai Lama- to this congress should be seen as "a positive step towards reconciliation."¹ The Dalai Lama was thus pleasantly surprised to see that the highest rung of the religious body of Hindus publicly acknowledged the divine status of Siddharta Gautama Buddha and recognized the presence of the Dalai Lama as a valuable contri-

¹ Hindu Vishva, March-April 1979, Special Number: Second World Hindu Conference [= HV], p. 19

bution towards the reconciliation between the two religious streams. These details gain special importance keeping in mind the fact that the powerful Hindu majority never was or is in dire need of support from a powerless Buddhist leader, who himself is living in exile in Hindu majority India. This experience was in contrast to the treatment given to him by the communist government of China. The powerful Hindu leadership was not interested in exploiting the helpless state of the Dalai Lama. Instead, they took a hard critical look within themselves, regretted the strained relations between the two religious streams and lauded his presence as an effort towards reconciliation. The Kashi Pandits, thus, took a bold step in deviating from the path of their predecessors, by welcoming the Dalai Lama to the World Hindu Congress as the religious leader of the Buddhists.

The Dalai Lama reciprocated this gesture of the hosts in a traditional Tibetan way by honouring two Kashi Pandits with a coconut and a white robe.² He was then officially asked to inaugurate the Hindu Congress. In his address to the Hindu delegates he mentioned: "It is a matter of surprise if we think in narrow terms that a Buddhist saint inaugurating a Hindu conference. I found nothing wrong in it."³ He emphasized the fact that Buddhism owes its origin to the Hindu religion and stated categorically: "After talking to the learned people here, I have come to the conclusion that there is no difference between our and their philosophy and worship."⁴

He thus clearly rejected the claims of ideological differences between these two religions and confirmed the basic similarities seen in the practices and teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to him the reincarnation theory is a clear proof of the special relationship between the Bauddha Dharma and the Hindu Dharma: "In this regard Buddhists are in union with the Bharatiya Dharma and culture."⁵

The Dalai Lama, however, does not fail to mention further in his speech that the conformity between these two streams does not necessarily compel us to choose either. "Tastes, interests and abilities differ from man to man. Hence it is not feasible for any one religion to fulfil their needs."⁶

Buddhism is thus not to be seen as the best way but just one of the many ways. It has proved to be the right way for some people. He thus very clearly refutes the claim of Buddhism being the only ultimate religion. He follows the constructive theory of relativity of religions and thus tries to place Buddhism among many diverse Dharmas and Sampradayas, that are necessary and legitimate in their existence.

"That is why different Dharmas and Sampradayas came into being. And this is but natural."⁷ The Dalai Lama further states that the non-Buddhist ways - he means the Hindu ways- are the real ways to "deliverance", the ultimate salvation, and to achieve it, is "the main aim of all religions."⁸ There is no one religious way that can be termed as a universally acceptable way and hence, "no single religion is suitable to all."⁹

The Dalai Lama denies any hierarchy within different religious ways, as for example, if one were to call Hinduism as a primitive stage of Buddhism: "This does not mean that one-religion is superior and another inferior."¹⁰ According to him, all the religious teachers have revealed their experiences for the well being of mankind, "but not to create differences between man and man."¹¹

The Dalai Lama's statements signify that he has no interest in the expansionistic policies of some religious organizations that foster inter-religious differences and widen the gulf between people. What is more important to him is that people put the teachings of their religion into practice.¹²

² HV p. 19

³ HV p. 30

⁴ HV p. 30

⁵ HV p. 32

⁶ HV p. 31

⁷ HV p. 31

⁸ HV p. 31

⁹ HV p. 31

¹⁰ HV p. 31

¹¹ HV p. 31

¹² HV p. 32

The concluding remarks of the Dalai Lama's speech also reveal that he does not dogmatize Buddhism. Though he personally regards Buddhism as the best choice for himself on account of his own experience, he still subjects his own religion to self critique and constant analysis and suggests needs for reforms. Towards the end of his speech he has expounded the historical religious criticism based on the concept of ontological interdependence in Buddhism. He has suggested reforms in the prevalent religious culture in order to safeguard universal Dharma. "According to Bhagwan Buddha all sacraments are subject to change. Hence for the preservation of fundamental principles of Dharma it is essential to review them from time to time and we must be prepared to adopt new and useful things and dispel those which proved outdated."¹³

With the above self-critical remarks the Dalai Lama welcomes the reconciliation offer of the Kashi Pandits after deep introspection and lays down the foundation for a new harmonious relationship between Hindus and Buddhists. This is in stark contrast to the anti-Hindu militancy of the Neo-Buddhists, who are influenced by Western confessionist ideology, Indian isolationist or Japanese imperialistic notions.

It is obvious that the Dalai Lama's inaugural address couched in classical language, touching on the essence of Bharatiya Dharma for today's times, was not a tactical move aimed at the committed Hindu delegates. In fact, his stand posed more of a political risk as affirmed by the subsequent events like the Congress government in India, under the leadership of Narasimha Rao, not allowing him to attend the next Hindu Congress, which was held in 1992 in Washington, D.C. The Gowda government totally dependent on the outside support of the atheist-communists and hence controlled by their ideologies also sought to silence him on account of his alleged anti-China propaganda. It is clear that the Dalai Lama realized that only the support of Hindus who are aware of the common legacy of Bharatiya Dharma can lead to true Dharma solidarity. And this was not the case with the power hungry groups that are solely interested in creating artificial religious rifts in the common Dharma culture.

This conviction of the Dalai Lama was reconfirmed again during the seventh Dharma Sansad¹⁴ held on 16. - 17. November 1996 in New Delhi, in which Samdhong Rinpoche was one of the participants. Contrary to the stand taken by the Communist controlled Indian government, Samdhong Rinpoche took this opportunity demanding "immediate withdrawal of Chinese military forces from Tibet" and wanted that Tibet be declared as "a place of peace and ahimsa with special world status."¹⁵

While the Indian Neo-Buddhists under Western or Japanese influence continued to attack the Hindus fiercely, the Dalai Lama had realized that in essence both Hinduism and Buddhism were part of the same cultural heritage, part of Bharatiya Dharma. Thus he and his Tibetan Buddhist followers could expect sincere and unshakable solidarity only from enlightened Hindus.

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¹³ HV p. 32

¹⁴ The most influential body of Hindu leaders and scholars.

¹⁵ VHP Bulletin, vol. 1, no. 2, Margshish Pournima Yugabd 5089, New Delhi, (1997), p. 1 and 8.